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A WANDERING STAR

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BY

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“THE SLAVE OF HIS WILL,” ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London

WARD AND DOWNEY

12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN

1892

LONDON :
PRINTED BY WOODFALL AND KINDER,
70 TO 76, LONG ACRE, W.C.

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CHAPTER I.

THERE is many a country gentleman who, even though his heart may be in the right place, as far as sport is concerned, still thinks a meet of hounds on his lawn an unmitigated nuisance. Not so Mr. Mossop! Although no lawn within a radius of twenty miles resembled velvet so closely as his own—though no avenues were so carefully weeded, swept, gravelled, and pebbled at the edges—though it was popularly believed that there was a man told off to pick up every dead leaf as it fell from the winter bough, and though a spic-and-span neatness was his particular hobby—he always

received the intimation that the hounds would meet at The Towers with pride and pleasure. He did not mind the hoof-marks on his carefully-attended turf, or the cutting-up of the gravel by endless carriage-wheels, or the presence of the rag-tag and bob-tail inside his usually hermetically-sealed park-gates. He did not grudge the great preparations for a huge hunt breakfast that no one wanted to eat, or a still more elaborate luncheon that none of the real hunting people would be at hand to partake of. All this was to him as nothing as long as an account of the Meet of Lord Gornaway's hounds at The Towers was duly chronicled in the *Field* and the county papers, and the hospitality and magnificence of its owner duly enlarged on in them.

He was a hunting man himself; that is to say, he wore immaculate buckskins from Bartley, and top-boots from Tautz, and a red coat that always looked as if it had been put on for the first time; his horses never cost him less than three or four hundred guineas, and he would not have thought his neck safe

on anything less expensive. He preserved foxes with jealous care, and was a larger subscriber to the Covert Fund than any other man in Blankshire.

If all this constitutes a sportsman then he was one, and as the rapture of the chase, or any kind of pleasure to be got out of galloping or jumping was utterly unknown to him, he should be commended rather than condemned for so much public spirit. He never jumped a fence when it could be avoided, never let his horse gallop except along the hard high road, and never knew a moment's happiness out hunting, except at the close of the day of the last—the very last—meet of the season, when he and his hunter were slowly jogging home. Even then the thought would come across his mind and rob him of all peace and comfort when he reflected that there might still be another by-day or two before he could congratulate himself that he had got through the season in safety, and that there would be no more risks to run for another six months at least.

The season is now drawing to its

close, and about ten days after he had walked home from church with Vega Fitzpatrick the hounds are advertised to meet at The Towers.

Mr. Mossop has, some days before, sent over the following note to Colonel Damer by special messenger :—

“MY DEAR DAMER,—

“I suppose it is useless to ask you and Lady Julia to give me the pleasure of your company at my hunt breakfast at The Towers on the 22nd, for you never will come. No people would be more welcome, and I hope, at any rate, that, if in our direction about luncheon time, you will honour my poor board. I am now writing to beg the non-hunting members of your party to drive over to the meet, and to promise that after seeing all they can see they will make a point of coming back to The Towers for luncheon. I shall be much gratified if Lady Hermione and her daughters, and Miss Fitzpatrick can be induced to do as much. The Towers are but bachelors' quarters, but we will do our very best, and will pay them every attention.—Yours,

“ALBERT MOSSOP.”

“There, Hermione,” says the Colonel, handing her the note, which has arrived in the middle of dinner, “what do you say to

that? Do you feel disposed to honour Mossop's poor board, which I may as well tell you will be literally groaning with good things? If so, I can send you all over in the waggonette. You had better go. It will be some fun for the girls."

"I hate hunting on wheels," says Lady Hermione, tartly. She had in her day ridden to hounds as straight as Lady Julia herself, and even now she does not fancy being relegated to a waggonette as a chaperone to three girls; "but," and here she remembers her forlorn hope in regard to Dottie, "Mr. Mossop would be disappointed, I suppose, if we refused him; we may just as well go."

"Welcome to The Towers, Lady Hermione," says Mr. Mossop, from his own hospitable doorstep, as the Conholt waggonette drives up to it on the morning of the meet. His greeting of welcome is spoken to Lady Hermione, but his eyes are greedily devouring every line of Vega's fair face, to which the boisterous March wind has brought a lovely colour, and whose eyes are

bright with youthful pleasure and excitement as they look eagerly on a scene so new to them. She takes in neither Mr. Mossop nor his castle, for one is of as little interest to her as the other, but the animation and bustle around her fills her with delight.

The hounds are grouped on the lawn, with the huntsman in their midst; he is old, wizened, and wiry, but full of importance, which is natural in one who firmly believes that there is no prouder position on earth than that of huntsman to Lord Gornaway's hounds; the whips, young, slim and alert—the long lashes of their stout hunting crops, ever ready to keep any stray hound within bounds, or to repress any riot in the pack—are close at hand; while the gravelled court is as crowded as Hyde Park Corner in the height of the season.

Everything that runs on wheels is here represented, from the four-in-hand drawn up on one side, that has brought a strong detachment of the Dancing Hussars from the Barracks at Grimthorpe, down to the

basket-cart drawn by a stout white pony, in which the Vicar's daughters, two bouncing young women with red cheeks, mean to see as much of the fun as possible.

There are large barouches, full of important-looking ladies, half buried in furs and velvet, and there are small broughams containing smart young men in red coats, and pretty women in habits, who evidently mean to be comfortable as long as they can ; there are high dog-carts, from which descend gingerly men, who wear long coats and white linen aprons ; and there are Grimthorpe flies, which have brought from the station those who have been obliged to come by rail.

Hunters are being led up and down by smart grooms ; ladies are being " put up " ; some of the horses are a trifle too fresh, and are kicking and plunging about in an uncomfortable sort of way, and the March sun shines on, and brightens up, a scene that can be seen in England, and in England alone.

No wonder that Vega Fitzpatrick does not

take stock of The Towers or its owner. The former is a castle indeed, but a brand new one.

The mellowing hand of Time has not subdued the bright red of the walls, or the white of the stonework that surrounds windows and doors, and, as it were, trims the whole. It has planted no moss in crevice or cranny, has softened down no hard edges, hung no garlands of ivy on the bare walls.

Everything is bright and shining, and new and glaring ; the plate-glass windows glow in the sun, and the flag, from the topmost tower, which waves proudly in the breeze whenever the lord and master is at home, seems newer, and to boast braver colours than ever did bunting before.

There is no denying that it is a well-built and handsome house, and its architect may be congratulated, inasmuch as he has made a servile copy in bright colours of a mediæval castle ; but it does not look like the home of a race, nor is it possible that romance or sentiment can, for many a long year to come, cling round its walls.

Lord Gornaway's arrival, in a mail phaeton, means business, and very soon the mob of horsemen and horsewomen, the long string of carriages, and a certain number of camp followers, in the shape of men and boys, who mean to see as much of the fun as possible on foot, stretch in a thick, unbroken line down the well-kept avenue in the direction of the first draw.

"You must promise faithfully to come back to luncheon, Lady Hermione," says Mr. Mossop, anxiously. "I shall be very much disappointed if you fail me. If there's nothing much doing, and we're at all near, I shall be sure to be back to do the honours myself. It's a bargain, is it not?"

Lady Hermione, who had never intended to do anything else, makes a favour of it. "Oh! yes, we shall try and get back, but pray don't let us be in your way. We had much better leave it an open question, and see where we find ourselves."

"No, no, Lady Hermione, that won't do at all;" and Mr. Mossop is weak enough to entreat her abjectly. "You'll be sick of

driving after the hounds in an hour or two, and then you must most certainly come back."

For all answer she waves her hand, and puts up her eyeglass to get a comprehensive view of what is going on. But she is better than her word, for after an hour or two of fast but fruitless driving in the vain hope of seeing something of the hunt that has swept far away from the people on the hard high road, they return to The Towers, to find its master once more at the doorstep, just getting off an animal who looks as fresh and with as little marks of hard work about him as his rider.

"I lost a shoe," says Mr. Mossop, to excuse himself (it would be curious to count the number of shoes Mr. Mossop's horses are credited with losing in the course of the hunting season!) and I thought I might as well come home at once. I couldn't find my second horseman anywhere, and it wasn't worth while laming my horse by trying to find him. They were doing nothing either. The hounds won't run a yard to-day, and I shan't lose anything if I don't pick them up

for an hour or so. Now, Lady Hermione, you must be cold and half-starved . . . let me help you ;” but Mr. Mossop is not as good as his word, for it falls to an important-looking butler, assisted by two tall powdered footmen, to take the long fur cloak off Lady Hermione’s handsome shoulders, and the rough plaids that wrap her daughters’ insignificant forms, while Mr. Mossop—his fat pudgy fingers trembling with excitement—actually has the joy of fumbling for the pin that fastens a poor little Shetland shawl under Vega’s white chin.”

He finds it at last, but her soft breath on his elderly cheek; and the joy of touching—though only as a servant might—her slim body, seems to make him lose his head, and he positively trembles before her.

“Come on, Vega, how slow you are !” says Lady Hermione, disagreeably, and they walk up the hall together. If the outside of The Towers is the model of everything that is right, fitting, and proper in the eyes of the architect who designed and built that pinch-beck castle, its interior might correctly be

described as the upholsterer's joy. The fortunate man, to whom *carte blanche* had been given "to do the thing properly," had been trammelled by no fancies or "fads" on the part of its owner, for Mr. Mossop was a perfect cipher from the decorators' point of view. The master of The Towers had no taste at all—good, bad, or indifferent—believed blindly all he was told, was far too timid to hazard an opinion, and when he paid without a murmur the longest bill that even Messrs. Dado, Frieze and Co. had ever managed to run up, their admiration of his behaviour was unbounded.

"*We* don't want no interference on the part of them as knows nothing about our business," were the words of one of the head men who had spent nearly a year at The Towers, while the great work of furnishing had been going on. "What can gentlemen and ladies show *us*, as has been at the work all our lives? When gentlemen comes a-shovin' in their oars, Lard! there's the devil to pay! They either knows nothing at all of what they are talking about,

or they have the rummiest notions got out o' a book—notions that won't wash, and that no workman that ever I saw could make head or tail of. And as for the ladies, they don't know what they want themselves; they never can make up their minds for two minutes together. What we puts up for them one day, we tears down the next, and they're always in such a doose of a hurry too. It's 'This *must* be done in a month, Mr. Grieves,' or, 'I *must* be into the droring-room when we comes down from town'—talk—talk—nag—nag—keeping us back, and wasting all our time, and when *they've* any hand in paying the bills, then you finds out what they are! There's nothing like a woman for meanness! No! indeed! give me a plain gentleman like Mr. Mossop, who knows nothing, and *knows* that he knows nothing. Which of 'em gets their work done best in the end, I should like to know?" There is this much to be said in favour of Mr. Grieves' opinions, that though everything in the house is a copy of something else, many of these copies are nearly as good as the

originals, and the most captious critic would fail to discover any anachronisms that had crept into the different styles. The entrance hall is Early English, and Early English down to the most minute details; never was there a room more thoroughly Renaissance than is the lofty, gloomy dining-room; while the "Versells Gallery," as Mr. Grieves was in the habit of calling the huge double drawing-rooms, is Louis XVI., in its severest form.

Watteau-like ladies in hoops and sacques, with courtly gentlemen in velvet coats, silk stockings, and high-heeled, diamond-buckled shoes, to kiss their hands, or to be their partners in gavotte, or stately minuet, would seem far more at home among all this gilded and formal splendour than Mr. Mossop and his friends! The ceiling, one mass of gold save where rosy cherubs sprawl on cloudless skies—the walls, half panel, half brocade—the draperies of gorgeous satin—the huge sofas with woodwork which, though severe in style, is all gilding together, the "Trianong suite" (to quote Mr. Grieves once more!) which could hardly be told from the models

of elegance by the master-hand of Riasener, once the property of those

“ Whose grandsires all earth’s greatest were
In grandeur, when the grand were great ; ”

all this magnificence is worthy of a different abode than The Towers, and a different owner than Mr. Mossop.

What would have been grand elsewhere, becomes formal here. What would be gorgeous in a palace, is vulgar in the brand-new house of the rich brewer.

Large fires are burning in the “ Versells Gallery,” but otherwise there is no sign that it is ever inhabited; and indeed it never is, for Mr. Mossop has a snugger of his own, and no mortal man could be expected to make himself comfortable on a Louis Seize sofa covered with the palest pink satin, on which twine exquisite garlands of flowers that look as if they were painted. No book—not even the Peerage—lies on the Trianon-tables—no newspapers or magazines make a pleasant litter anywhere. There are magnificent flower-vases, but no flowers are in

them, and the "occasional" tables are bare, as if they still stood in the show-rooms of Messrs. Dado and Frieze.

Lady Hermione sweeps up the splendid room and takes possession of a great gilded arm-chair near the fireplace.

"This is a magnificent room certainly, Mr. Mossop," she says, looking round, her practised eye taking stock of everything great or small.

"I am glad you like it, Lady Hermione," Mr. Mossop answers, looking about him in a deprecating manner; "and I must say I think Dado and Frieze have done the thing in first-rate style. I did not limit them in any way, and they have certainly made a very good job of it. They sent me in a swingeing bill for it all; but, after all, I have got my money's worth, for it couldn't be handsomer in its own line. Plenty of gilding and glass—just the thing I like! I believe they call it Louis the something or other, but I get confused among all these Louises. I never can remember which is which. I only know that

one style is all curls and twirls, and the other has straight lines and everything at right-angles, like what we have got here. 'You pays your money and you takes your choice.' Do you see those tables and things bound in brass? They are copied from a suite of furniture that was sold out of a duke's palace for no less than £14,000. The people who gave that price for them must have had very little to do with their money. I didn't pay a tenth—no, nor a twentieth part of that sum for these things, and if you saw them side by side with the originals you couldn't tell which was which. Come and take a look at the conservatory now." And he leads his guests once more down the room to the large glass-doors that open on a wealth of flowers, shadowed by slender palms and luxuriant treeferns, and which have for background a hedge of camellias in full bloom and orange-trees covered with green fruit. Vega is delighted with the flowers and with the sweet smell of hyacinth and lily-of-the-valley and fragrant narcissus. She buries her pretty nose in each of them by

turn, and flits like a bird on the wing from flower to flower. "This is meant for a boudoir," says Mr. Mossop, as he opens another door that also gives on the conservatory, and takes her into an unfurnished room of pretty proportions, on whose walls are fluted the palest blue satin, and the uprights of whose mantelpiece are beautiful cupids in white Carrara marble. "What do you think of it, Miss Fitzpatrick? It is begun well, isn't it? There was no good in going on with it. We poor bachelors don't want boudoirs, and I thought it the best plan to let the furnishing stand over till The Towers had a mistress. Ladies have their own fancies about all that. How do *you* think it should be done up?"

There is a certain amount of meaning in his words, but neither voice nor eye are good interpreters for him, and from neither the one nor the other does Vega learn what he would fain convey to her mind. "Oh, I don't know anything about furnishing," she answers lightly. "You must ask some one wiser than me. You know I am not accus-

tomed to splendour. I only know that everything is very, *very* pretty here."

"I am very glad to hear you say so," says Mr. Mossop, a gratified smile stealing over his heavy countenance as he speaks. "There has certainly been no expense spared, and it ought to be good, at any rate. This is the only room in the house that has been left unfurnished, and I hope it won't long remain so."

There is still more meaning in his voice now, but Vega is deaf to it.

She feels utterly indifferent, both as regards the future owner of the room and its furniture.

"Happy the lady as sits in that boudoir," were Mr. Grieves' words of blessing as he took his leave of The Towers after his year's sojourn, and there is one thing certain—that no one up to the present moment has so nearly attained that proud position as this young girl, who, in somewhat shabby black, now looks around her with such an indifferent eye.

"We are starving, Mr. Mossop," breaks

in Lady Hermione, abruptly. "Is there no chance of luncheon? We mustn't keep the horses out all day."

"Oh! I beg your pardon!—I beg ten thousand pardons," says Mr. Mossop, much upset at the idea of having failed in his duties as host. "Let me show you the way, Lady Hermione. I know it must be quite ready by this time."

The long table in the Renaissance dining-room is positively laden with dainties. Preparations have been made on a large scale on the off-chance of Lord Gornaway and the rest of the field being near The Towers about luncheon time. Mr. Mossop, to do him justice, is most hospitably-minded, and on an occasion like the present he only errs by an excess.

On the table, and on half a dozen sideboards and smaller tables, there is enough food for a regiment, and turkeys, rounds of beef, and great pies are flanked by lobsters, cray-fish, *pâté de foie gras*, *caviare*, and everything that could stimulate a far more jaded appetite than is usually possessed by a fox-hunting squire.

Mr. Mossop presses them to eat and drink, yea, to drink champagne abundantly, and is positively hurt at their moderation! Lady Hermione, however, partakes of many dainties, reserving to herself, at the same time, the right of finding fault with everything as soon as she gets home. Vega's pretty face is nearly hid behind a huge boar's head, which seems brighter and shinier than was ever such a head before, and whose white tusks bite the largest lemon that ever hung on bough! Pussie munches on in silence, and Dottie makes such play with some *marrons glacés* that Mr. Mossop insists on sending to the housekeeper for a large box of the dainty for her to take home with her!

"There is evidently no one else coming," says Mr. Mossop in a tone of the deepest disappointment, as his eyes turn for about the twentieth time in the direction of the huge bow window. "It is always the way. When one is ready for them, not a soul comes, and if there was nothing prepared, the whole field would be on us. Do have one more

foie gras sandwich, Lady Hermione. My *chef* makes them very nicely; and, Miss Fitzpatrick, you are eating nothing, absolutely nothing! Let me give you one of these surprise things, half ice, half hot chocolate; they are rather good, for those who like sweets, and my *chef* is quite famous for them."

"As if one had never tasted food that was cooked by a Frenchman before," thinks Lady Hermione, contemptuously, to herself; "but the swagger of a *nouveau riche* is simply appalling."

"Now, Lady Hermione, if it is agreeable to you," says her host, "I vote we have our coffee in the hall, and then the young ladies shall have some music. I am sure they would like to hear my new Orchestrion. It has just come down from town, and though I say it as shouldn't, it ought to be a good one, for it cost me no less than six hundred golden sovereigns. It has any number of tunes, and when I want a change, all I have got to do is to send up £50 and get a new barrel." He leads the way to the hall, where

the huge Orchestrion stands on one side of the tasteless heavy wooden erection that flanks the fireplace, and which Messrs. Dado and Frieze have told Mr. Mossop is the finest copy of an Early English inglenook that has ever been carved and pieced together.

A procession of servants enter the hall, bearing Turkish coffee, as well as that which usually suffices for ordinary mortals, followed by two or three different kinds of liqueurs, and liqueur glasses in embossed silver cases ; the rear is brought up by the tallest of the powdered footmen, who staggers under the weight of a huge cylinder for the Orchestrion.

“ This is my last little extravagance,” says Mr. Mossop, proudly. “ I hope you will approve, Miss Fitzpatrick. For my part, I think there is no music like it. Now you shall hear how well some of the tunes that one knows sound on it,” and in a few minutes the Orchestrion has it all its own way, for the noise made by that instrument, half barrel organ, half German band, un-

modulated by distance, drowns the human voice entirely.

The time it keeps is good—the phrasing perfection, but the noise made can hardly be dignified by the name of music! It is mechanical, unfeeling, and unsympathetic. Its owner, however, is deaf to these sins of omission; he is also in a mood to be pleased by anything to-day, and is thoroughly contented with himself and his surroundings.

He is glad that the Conholt party is there to be entertained by him. He is happy inasmuch as he has got off with half a day's hunting, and that the presence of his guests gives him a decent excuse for not risking his neck again that day; he has lunched well, and as he now sits drinking coffee opposite a blazing fire, gently soothed by the only music that he is capable of appreciating, and gazing his fill at the pretty girl who rests her sunshiny head in the corner of his inglenook, he feels as if he had nothing left to wish for.

The “Mikado” barrel is at last exhausted, the insatiable Orchestrion is once

more fed, and now, "La fille de Madame Angot" is rattled through loudly and noisily.

"We really can't stay here all day," says Lady Hermione, unpleasantly. "We have paid you a regular visitation as it is." No doubt her visitation would have been longer, and the glorified barrel organ would have grated less on her nerves, had her host's beady eyes been fixed on the opposite corner of the inglenook, where Dottie, sulky and ill-tempered, has ensconced herself!

In her heart of hearts she does not believe that her youngest child has it in her to attract Mr. Mossop, or any one else for that matter.

No one has a poorer opinion of her daughter's fascinations than has Lady Hermione; nevertheless she cannot see a possible prey escape without a pang. She despises her low-born host, she sneers at everything in and about The Towers, but she grudges them both to Vega Fitzpatrick, who is an interloper in her eyes.

"You must come over soon again and

spend a long day at The Towers, whenever the hunting is fairly over," says the hospitable Mr. Mossop, as he waves them off from his own hall-door. His words are addressed to Lady Hermione, but his eyes are fixed on Vega's slim figure as she steps lightly into the waggonette.

"You will honour my poor abode again too, I hope, Miss Fitzpatrick. You have seen nothing of the place, or the gardens, or the houses—and the home farm too! I should like you to see my model farm! You must come and be martyred"—this he adds in a tone of clumsy playfulness.

Vega laughs back at him, as it is her way to smile in every face who looks kindly on her. She means nothing by it, but she does not know that he means anything by his words either!

"Oh, yes, Mr. Mossop; I will come back whenever you ask me. I should like so much to see everything. I have had a delightful afternoon, and thank you so very much."

"What do you mean by that?" asks

Lady Hermione sharply, as they bowl down the approach—smooth as a billiard-table. “I must say your manners are most extraordinary, Miss Fitzpatrick. You take Mr. Mossop’s attentions entirely to yourself, and talk as if you were perfectly independent. When do you mean to honour The Towers with your company? We shall have Pussie and Dottie paying visits to young men next! I suppose these are Dieppe ways!”

Vega blushes rosy red.

“I didn’t mean to say or do anything wrong, Lady Hermione; but Mr. Mossop was so kind, and when he asked me to come over, I didn’t know what else to say.”

“Asked *you* to come over!” repeats Lady Hermione, with a contemptuous smile, as she wraps her old fur cloak around her handsome shoulders with the air of an empress, and leans back in her corner. “I suppose we may be imagined to be included in the invitation also? Not that a day spent in his society in that dreadful house that smells of money—positively smells of money—would have attractions for most people;

but you are far-seeing, Miss Fitzpatrick—very much more wide-awake than your neighbours.”

While her mother speaks, Pussie looks neither more nor less dull and uninteresting than usual ; but Dottie triumphs, and she eyes her unconscious rival with a good deal of vindictive spite.

CHAPTER II.

“ In the greenest growth of the May-time
I rode when the woods were wet,
Between the dawn and the daytime,
The Spring was glad that we met.”

THE Conholt woods are no longer ablaze with daffodils ; their hardy heads no longer nod in the keen winds of March. Even the wild hyacinths, that lay like a blue mist on the banks of the wooded glen but a short time ago, have faded ; and the wood anemones, delicate and fragile, have lived out their short day. The tender emerald of larch and beech has turned into a deeper and more vivid green, and the trees—most of them—are brave in full summer foliage. The only defaulters are the oak, whose crumpled leaves are still but half open, and the sad and sullen ash, who spreads out

naked branches, forbidding and harsh, among so much verdure and freshness. The country is at its very best ; for the hope of summer is always more beautiful than its full glory. Everything seems bursting into life. The chestnuts, pink and white, are in full flower ; long graceful tassels hang from acacia and laburnum bough ; and a lovely rose-hued garment clothes each poor thorn-bush that, but a short time ago, looked so brown and hard and meagre.

But it is not the desire to see her home in all the freshness and glory of spring that lures Lady Julia from London in the merry month of May ; and it must be confessed that, when there is nothing to be done in the country, and nothing to be either shot or hunted, Colonel Damer also prefers the sweet shady side of Pall Mall to the woods of Conholt.

But what is Whitsuntide for, if not to give jaded Londoners an opportunity to rest, and people who *live* every day of their lives a chance of varying their amusements ?

Though London is empty, though there is not a soul in town, and though, in the words of the servants' hall, "everybody as is everybody" has taken advantage of the holidays to leave it—still there is no need to mope. Indeed, there is a certain zest about a change of scene, as long as the company and the amusements are identical.

The Damers act on this principle. They turn their backs on London and their pretty house in Mayfair, and go down to Conholt. They do not covet each other's society, or reckon a *tête-à-tête* among their holiday amusements ; for Colonel Damer knows, by sad experience, what Lady Julia would be under such circumstances. But they fill their house with smart people, who come down prepared to enjoy the country to the extent of kicking up their heels a little higher there than would be possible in London.

Vega has had but a poor time of it since they went up to town after Easter, leaving herself and Lady Hermione and her daughters in possession. It would be hard to believe

that Lady Julia could be any loss to her—and, indeed, she was only so in a negative kind of way. She engrossed Lady Hermione's attention, who, while her sister was at home, and while there was a constant stream of visitors to and from Conholt, did not see much either of her daughters or Vega.

But, alas ! Lady Hermione had succeeded in re-letting her small house in London for the season, and had managed to extort from Lady Julia a grudging permission to prolong her visit for another month or two.

“And after that you really must go, Hermione,” had said Lady Julia, who as ever was brutally plain-spoken. “It's all very well for you and Pussie and Dottie to come to us every now and then for a moderately long visit ; but you can't quite look on our house as your home. I must say that Reginald has many faults, but want of hospitality cannot be counted among them. Still, even he will turn in the end. You have been two months here already. I should like to know who else would take you in for so long ; and now

you want to stay on while we are in town. Well, all right! do so if you like! But I must say, I hope you will be able to get into your own house again when we come back here for good."

Lady Hermione's eye flashes, but by a mighty effort she keeps her temper. Not the least among the miseries of poverty does she reckon the necessity of bearing as meekly as she is able the flouts of her sister and others like her. She would dearly like to pay her back in her own coin, and be as frank as Lady Julia herself. It would be sweet, indeed, to let her hear the truth once in her life. But stronger even than this desire is the instinct of self-preservation. They are so poor—so miserably poor—the result of breaking with Lady Julia would be utter destruction, from a social point of view. The alternative of cheap lodgings in an out-of-the way village, or in some dead-and-alive watering-place, does not smile on Lady Hermione, and the same motives of expediency that led Henry the Fourth of France to consider Paris well worth a mass

induces her now to keep the peace at any price, and to curb her hot heart and temper.

One parting shot she fires, and she would be more than flesh and blood if she could resist it.

“After all, Julia, if you object so strongly to people taking root in your house, you ought to look out in another direction. *We* are harmless, at any rate ; but I don’t think Miss Fitzpatrick quite comes under that head. Mark my words, let her stay here but a short time longer, and you will be saddled with her for life. Reginald wouldn’t mind *that*, I suppose ! She makes up to him in the most bare-faced manner and, like all men, he is flattered. Indeed, he seems to have a tremendous fancy for her ; that wouldn’t afflict you very much, I dare say ! It would be rather ‘vieux jeu’ if you became jealous of your husband at this time of day. But there are other people besides Reginald in the world. She will cross your path, and if she stays here for good she will cut you out with some of your young men, or I am much mistaken. She is far too hand-

some, Julia, to be a mere cipher in the house."

Lady Julia positively writhes. It is as gall and wormwood to insinuate to her that Vega might possibly outshine her, that her lovers might leave her for a younger, fairer face, and to be told by her sister that the girl is so dangerously bewitching that she will have to look to her laurels is almost more than she can stand.

Lady Hermione has all but overreached herself, for, anxious to revenge herself on some one, no matter who, Lady Julia nearly cancels on the spot the permission to prolong her visit, that Lady Hermione has wrung from her. She hits on a better plan, however. It is a flash of inspiration; and she smiles to herself as she turns the tables on her sister.

"You have always been much alarmed about this girl, Hermione," she says, coldly, though she still rages inwardly, "so I may as well relieve your mind at once and for ever. She will *not* be a dead weight on our hands. To do her justice, girls as good-looking as

she is do not hang fire for long. It would be quite another thing if it was Pussie or Dottie. Oh! yes, Hermione! don't get put out at once. Of course I like them because they're your children, and all that; but they're what I call *hopeless*! This Fitzpatrick girl is quite different; she was bound to pick up some one, and I needn't tell you who that some one is. Mr. Mossop has spoken to me about her constantly, and, needless to say, I have given him every encouragement. He is desperately in love with her, poor wretch! He has been over here till I am sick of the sight of him. However, all that sort of thing will soon be over now. I expect it will all be settled at this picnic that we are going to have to-morrow. It will be a real good marriage for her—twice as good as anything she had the right to expect."

"And Miss Vega?" asks Lady Hermione, after a minute's pause, "what will her answer be? Is it possible she will accept such a creature—such a dreadful little cad?"

Lady Julia laughs loud and long.

“ If you ever say your prayers, Hermione, you would be on your knees, returning thanks at this moment, if Dottie was the object of his affections instead of Vega ! Mr. Mossop is not so bad after all. Of course, he is ostentatious and a trifle bumptious, but he is thoroughly good-natured ; and then his money ! He has enough of that to cover a multitude of sins. Who thinks of birth now-a-days in comparison with cash ? A man may be gutter-bred ; his father may have picked rags, and his grandfather oakum, for all any one knows or cares in these levelling times. Money — money — money ! That is all that is wanted, and Vega may thank her stars if she ever reigns at The Towers, shoddy as it is inside and out ! Oh yes, she won’t trouble us much longer, and once she is safe off my hands, ‘ bon jour ’ to her. I shan’t cultivate the Mossop connection very much, I promise you ; so there won’t be much chance of her being in my way.”

* * * * *

“ If there is one thing more than another

that I hate," says Lady Julia Damer the next morning to Bertie Vansittart, who is still her devoted admirer, though she has grown a trifle tired of him, "it is what we have in store for us at this moment—a long day's pleasuring in the open air, to be rattled off immediately after breakfast, with no hope of getting home much before dinner-time. The very idea of what is hanging over my head makes me yawn."

Bertie Vansittart gazes at her with adoring eyes, but he does not put into words the thought uppermost in his mind, which is that if she disliked it so very much he wonders that she should have proposed and got up the expedition. Slave as he is, he has long ago found out that anything that does not suit his imperious mistress is seldom carried out ; but he cannot read under the cards, and is quite in the dark.

"Yes," goes on his liege lady ; "here we are, eighteen sane people, who would all be tolerably happy if we were only left alone. Instead of that we are doomed to be all day long in each other's company. We

shall have to grin, and talk, and pretend to be amused for eight mortal hours ! We will lunch on food spread out on damp grass at our feet, and we will sit on stones or planks, or cottage chairs, with our plates balanced as best we can, and close to our noses. After our horrid, uncomfortable meal we shall have to loiter about doing nothing : wandering through damp woods, or poking about among ruins that don't interest any one of us in the faintest degree. Two or three couples will flirt hard, and the rest of the world will yawn their heads off. That is our programme for to-day ! ”

“ I am one with you in all you say ; a big picnic can be very slow,” says Bertie Vansittart. He generally does agree with Lady Julia on every imaginable subject, partly because his infatuation for her has made him servile, and partly from policy ! “ It is almost a pity the idea was ever started. We should have been much happier and freer at home.”

“ And at home we should have been, my good boy, under ordinary circumstances,” says her ladyship, mockingly, while the

guests, booted and spurred, begin to gather in the entrance-hall, ready for the start. "No power would have induced me to take so much trouble but for two reasons: one of them is—*that!*" and she looks in the direction of Mr. Mossop, who has just appeared on the scene, having driven over from The Towers to join them, and who now, awkward, ill at ease, and breathing very hard, is fastening the largest gardenia ever seen out of a flower-show in the front of Miss Fitzpatrick's black jacket. His fat, pudgy fingers shake as he fumbles with the pin, and his task is certainly made no easier by the evident light-heartedness of the lady he is adorning. She is filled with delight at the prospect of the day's holiday, and her joy being tempered by no fear that it may be too long, she certainly does not keep very still under the hands of her admirer, who finds it extremely difficult to fasten the large white flower to his liking.

"*That!*" repeats Bertie Vansittart, looking first mystified and then disgusted. "You don't mean to tell me, Lady Julia,

that there is anything between those two? It isn't possible! That lovely girl is surely meant for something better than such a lout!"

"That lovely girl, as you call her," says Lady Julia, frowning, "would be lucky beyond her deserts if something comes of it. I dare say you know by this time, Bertie, that it is uncommonly hard to get along with very little money—but how is it to be done with none at all? That is Miss Fitzpatrick's position. She is practically a pauper, and her father was such a black sheep that all the relations who would otherwise have been bound to help him shook him off long ago—him and his. This girl has hardly a penny in the world, and no home, or people. We can't keep her for ever; she is nothing to us, though, as Reginald was some sort of far-away cousin to the mother, I should be glad if I could help her to a rich husband. And here is Mr. Mossop ready and willing! I only hope the whole business will be settled to-day, and that one, at least, of my plans will succeed,"—this with a kind of sigh.

Lady Julia is looking magnificent this morning. Unlike the generality of women whose first youth is past, she can brave the light of day, and look all the more glorious in it. Thanks to the open-air life she leads, winter as well as summer, she is as slim and lightly supple as any one of her queenly height and noble proportions could expect to be. Her olive skin has on it the bloom and colour of perfect health, her large dark eyes are clear and bright, her hair is shining, and the rose carmine on her cheeks is as delicately brilliant as if she were still a girl. Dressed to perfection as she is, a more complete picture of a beautiful woman it would be hard to find; the tight-fitting coat of Lincoln green slashed with silver fits like a glove the most perfect shoulders in the world, and gleams of silver light up her whole costume, and give it the touch of brightness that it might lack.

There is hardly a woman to be found anywhere who could enter into competition with Lady Julia Damer as far as mere animal beauty goes; there is not a woman at present

in the house whose pretensions would not be laughable beside her own. Vega herself will never be *belle femme* like the other, and to look on her as a rival to her hostess would be pure foolishness.

Still men are strange creatures ! and those who may be credited with good taste, even while they acknowledge Lady Julia's grand type, are apt to turn from her to the childish face and sweet pleading eyes of the girl whom Lady Hermione considers an interloper in their midst.

The carriages that are to convey the large party to the railway station have not yet come round, and the guests still gather in the hall by two's and three's. Bertie Vansittart is eager to find out Lady Julia's other reason for doing violence to her own inclinations, and organizing this long summer day's expedition to the ruins of Grimstone Castle.

"And your other plan," he asks eagerly. "Is that matrimonial also ? Do you mean some more of your guests to make love to each other, or what is the second

object you have in view in taking us all over?"

"No, no!" she says; "no more match-making for me! That is not in my line at all. This other plan of mine is purely personal. After having been so much bored as I have been ever since I came down to Conholt, I think I have some right to please myself. Who do you think is going to meet us this afternoon? I will give you twenty guesses, and you will never hit on the right man. Never—for every one thinks he is at the other end of the world; and once people are right away, their friends never seem to imagine there is the slightest chance of their ever coming back again! You can't make out who it is, I see—a *very* great friend of mine."

"You have so many, Lady Bijou," sighs the young man, and his eyes meet hers reproachfully; he is not very brilliant, but he resents being made her ladyship's confidant, and does not relish the task of guessing the name of "the *very* great friend" whose presence at the picnic is to console Lady Julia

for all the drawbacks of the expedition! She, on the other hand, is careless of his feelings; she likes to ride rough-shod over her victims; indeed it is her firm belief that insolence and indifference keep them at her side longer than if she were loving and sweet.

She watches her victim's annoyance with something like pleasure—a pleasure that arises partly from the proof it gives her that his passion for her still burns fierce and strong—partly from an innate love of tormenting. “So you can't make out which of my friends is coming from the uttermost ends of the earth to meet us to-day?” and she laughs with satisfaction. “Well! you shan't be kept in ignorance any longer, Bertie. It is no less than Brian Beresford. What do you think of that? He only arrived in England two days ago, and only came down to these parts last night. Of course I wanted him to come to us straight, and let his relations slide; he could go to them at any time. But he wouldn't do that; said his people would never forgive him if

he didn't pay them a visit first. I never heard such nonsense in my life! As if, after having been away from them for so long, they couldn't have waited a few days longer! But no! Brian is pretty obstinate when he chooses, so in spite of all that I could say he has gone to them. His sister's home is about ten miles from the place we shall be at to-day—quite the other end of the county from here, so I have made him promise to come over to Grimstone Castle somehow, and meet us there. Just think, Bertie! I haven't seen him for eight long months! It is a lifetime! You can't think how much I have missed him."

"A pleasant sort of thing for a fellow to hear," says poor Bertie, feeling every word she says as a direct insult. He wishes he had the spirit to break with her at once and for ever; he would like now to leave her to her undisturbed reflections, but he cannot bring himself to do it. What principally holds him fast is the knowledge that she would not care if he went, and that his vacant place would be speedily filled by some one else! "I suppose," he goes on,

“that none of us will have any chance now that Beresford is back. For my part, I shouldn’t have broken my heart if he had stayed away for ever.”

“Thank Heaven!” says Lady Julia, piously, “that your wishes have been powerless. Well! I suppose we must be moving now. Time’s up. If we are to catch the train at Nettleby Station we must be off.”

So Lady Julia, who, to do her justice, is an excellent organizer, and to whom it is almost second nature to arrange every sort of society amusement, sends off her party to the railway station, fills the omnibus with the more important of her guests, crams the waggonette with young, laughing, and light-hearted men and girls, and herself follows with Bertie Vansittart in her own smart cart and high-stepping pony. She is a first-rate whip, and takes the greatest pleasure in driving anything so difficult as the well-bred and spirited animal that is her especial property. She also likes to have Vansittart at her side, for though she has just done her best to annoy and humiliate him, she

must have a slave, and she *must* be made love to! If she dreads the length of the day, she has at least done everything in her power to make it go off well. All her plans have been laid with the precision of a general who commands an army in an enemy's country.

Servants have been sent on ahead to arrange everything in the most luxurious fashion; the ordinary train along the single line that passes close to the Grimstone Castle ruins has the honour of conveying them to their destination, but as only two or three trains in the day run on that unimportant and little-used line, and as the last one would be too early for the revellers, she has had a "special" ordered to bring them home in time for dinner. Not a stone is left unturned to ensure a success—she likes to be told that her parties are always a success—she likes to be considered one of the queens of society, and she realizes very clearly that she owes something to that society which is so conveniently blind to her little escapades, but who would be so much more clear-sighted

did she not entertain them so royally. She undoubtedly has her reward!

If her handsome, well-shaped feet have now and then strayed from virtue's path, at any rate she has not been hounded into the broad road that leads to destruction by a merciless world. It has been an easy-going and long-suffering world as far as she is concerned, and she has received from it better treatment by far than she has deserved, for while justice, and not mercy, has been meted out to far less flagrant offenders, mercy—overflowing mercy—has been her portion.

Who, indeed, would be the first to cast a stone at a great lady who is so hospitable, so charitable, so capable of giving her friends so much that they like? Who wishes to be excluded from balls and parties, and all manner of novel and costly amusements, which the greatest in the land sanction and hallow by their presence? So Lady Julia goes on her victorious way, unmolested by public opinion, and if she sometimes grumbles at the price she pays for such immunity, she never fails to meet the debt.

Sometimes she amuses the county, sometimes she makes merry with her London friends, and sometimes she entertains the masses, under which head she is apt to include those who would be very much surprised if they imagined they were put in such a category !

This Whitsuntide party is composed entirely of her own particular friends, and this picnic is to be only one proof more of her talent for organization. She neglects nothing that can make it a success. Grimstone Castle is reached at exactly the right time : there is half an hour before luncheon to wander about among the grand old ruins, to encompass what were once such strong fortifications, to pass through crumbling archways, and to climb up steep and half-broken winding stairs, to peer into gloomy rooms whose narrow casements are dark with strong-growing ivy, to look from Gothic window or ladies' lattice, to tread the banqueting-hall, to stand on the mossy hearthstone of the great arched kitchen, and to shudder as the locked and grated door that leads down to the dungeons is passed.

All this the Conholt party do. The day is bright and fair—a true May day—the azure blue sky is flecked here and there with the slightest possible approach to a cloud, while gleams of sunshine light up the ancient walls, and brighten the ivy, black with age, that clings to them so stoutly ; beech, larch, and delicate birch, and the rich and luxuriant foliage of sycamore and lime form the brightest green background imaginable, and their waving boughs, as they swing on the light breeze, seem to sing a song of welcome. All the wild-flowers seem to have begun to blow at one and the same moment, and an old hawthorn-bush that grows right in the centre of the great hall is a sheet of pinky white. Some of the party sit under its shadow ; the merry voices of the others may be heard in all directions, and ever and anon a light figure in fluttering garments, generally with an attendant cavalier, may be seen against the sky-line on the battlements, which have only been reached after a bold and venture-some climb.

Lady Julia wanders under the beech-trees

that stretch in a straight line to the high road from the principal entrance of the Castle; Bertie Vansittart is with her as usual, but she gives him but scant attention, for her thoughts are distraught, and she strains her ears to hear the sound of approaching wheels.

“Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the wheels of his chariot?”

Up and down she paces, and her mind wanders more and more from her companion's words, and the frown on her forehead grows deeper and more marked.

The sound of a waggon in the far distance gives her emotions; the railway whistle makes her start; the hand that Bertie Vansittart presses to his lips is hot and feverish; and when she looks for the fiftieth time at the tiny jewelled watch she wears on her wrist, and finds it has not stopped, but that it is now luncheon-time and Brian Beresford is not here, she turns back to her party in a most disturbed frame of mind.

She cannot prevent her guests eating, drinking, and making merry, nor can she forbid the gay word and jest, or the peals of

laughter in which some of those more light-hearted than herself indulge ; but she looks as black as thunder, and on this occasion, at least, her duties as the giver of the feast are performed by proxy.

In vain does Bertie make love to her ; in vain are flattering words whispered in her ear by some of the other guests. She makes a convenient headache an excuse for her bad manners, but she never was good at concealing her feelings, and her evil temper is written in plain characters on her handsome, sulky, blooming face.

“ What is the matter with her ladyship, Regie ? ” says old Colonel Grahame to her husband, as they sit somewhat out of the hurly-burly, doing full justice to a first-rate luncheon.

All manner of good things are spread out on a ruined wall between them, and the two men are as well off as they can expect to be under the circumstances. They would infinitely rather be at home ; they have arrived at the age when picnics are apt to pall on the elderly masculine mind, but at

the same time they are making the best they can of a bad business.

“Lady Julia seems a good deal annoyed about something or other,” goes on Colonel Grahame, who, being an old friend of the family, can afford to be frank. “What has gone wrong?”

Colonel Damer looks up in the direction of his wife, and notices for the first time her lowering brow.

“My dear Grahame,” he answers, lightly, “I must refer you to Bertie Vansittart, or some other victim, if you want to find out. No doubt there has been some fault of omission or commission on their part which has annoyed her. I keep out of the way when there is thunder in the air, and I find it generally blows over. Anyhow, I am the last person in the world who ought to be expected to put things straight.”

“You are pretty easy-going, certainly,” says Colonel Grahame; “but I have no doubt that, with a spirited woman, like your wife, it is the best plan. I expect the sinner this time is poor Vansittart, for he is looking

perfectly miserable. I have been watching him for the last ten minutes ; he has cut himself in two to give satisfaction. I believe for a trifle he would make a footstool of himself for her ladyship's lovely feet. Well, he is a harmless kind of creature, and all the pretty women I know have their attendant slave now-a-days."

Colonel Grahame lifts his eyeglass to his keen old eye and makes a slow inspection of the company till he lights on another pair of people, who are also seated somewhat apart from the giddy throng.

"Is it possible," he asks, in tones of surprise, "that Mr. Mossop has the audacity to lift his eyes to that beautiful Fitzpatrick girl? He seems to be paying her the greatest possible attention at the present moment. Look at him—look at him, Regie! Why, the man is positively blushing! He is highly excited, and is looking uncommonly hot in consequence. I suppose he has been pouring soft nothings into her ears. I wonder she can stand that sort of thing from such a little cad!"

“ Julia assures me,” says Colonel Damer, as he, too, looks across the court to a shady corner where Mr. Mossop and Vega are lunching, “ that Mossop’s attentions are unmistakable, and she declares that Vega gives him the greatest encouragement. I expect the wish is father to the thought in a great measure, for my wife has set her heart on that marriage coming off. For my part, I don’t know what to say about it. Vega Fitzpatrick is the sweetest little girl I ever knew, and she has made me very fond of her. Naturally, I think her a thousand times too good for that fellow Mossop, who is common and under-bred, and shows his utter want of quality in everything he says or does. He is too old for her, too—too old and too ugly ! On the other hand, he has plenty of money and a nice enough place ; and though he is a cad, as you say, he is, at all events, a good-natured one. One can’t blink the fact that the poor little thing is in a very peculiar and a very friendless position. Not one of the Vivian relations would ever have anything to do with the

Fitzpatricks since her father came to grief. They even let poor Mary die of a broken heart, so determined were they to shake off the whole family. I believe they hardly know of this child's existence, or, at any rate, they don't want to know it. I never heard what relations there were on her father's side—none that could do her much good, I fancy. If you remember, Grahame, no one ever knew much about Ralph Fitzpatrick's family. He was good-looking, and he was the fashion, and then he married a Vivian, but no one quite made out where he sprang from himself. So the long and the short of it is, poor Vega has not a soul to turn to except ourselves."

"She has got a good friend in you, Regie, at any rate," says Colonel Grahame, kindly, "and she might do worse."

"Yes," answers Colonel Damer; "but, fond as I am of her, I can't expect wonders from Julia. It is quite natural that she wouldn't care to be burdened always with a young girl, and she is the last person who would spoil all her own fun to look after some

one who had no real claim on her. No, no ! I wouldn't even propose it. Well, then, what's to be done with the child ? She has no money, or as good as none. Perhaps a marriage to a rich man, who would at least be kind to her, would be the best thing that could happen to her. Who knows, too, but that Mossop's want of birth may be a point in his favour after all, for there are some families who would strongly object to Ralph Fitzpatrick's daughter coming among them ? He was not only a black sheep, but a poor, disreputable black sheep. He never forced his way back into the fold, as so many of them do now-a-days. To do him justice, he never tried.

“ He was branded once and for ever. He wasn't even lucky enough to be forgotten. For some reason or other his sins are raked up, and discussed, and talked over, even up to the present time. Other sins as glaring and heinous are forgotten, but either because he was such a well-known figure in London society, or because such cases have a morbid interest to some people, the waters of oblivion have never passed over them.”

“And even if a story of that kind is half forgotten,” says Colonel Grahame, “it is always there to be dragged to the light of day to suit people’s plans, or gratify their spite. You are very wise, Damer. If this fellow is at all possible, that is to say, if he is good-natured and good-hearted enough, and warranted not to make the poor child miserable, I should waive all thoughts about his want of birth and breeding, and think her uncommonly lucky to be safely settled for life. I dare say she’s seen very few men, and she’d get to like a kind husband well enough in time, even though he was a trifle vulgar. I suppose we ought to go and join the rest of them now, Damer. I see luncheon is over, and they are all on the move. After what you have told me I shall give those two a wide berth, for, all things considered, I don’t believe that pretty girl could do better than accept Mr. Mossop. From the maudlin expression of his countenance, I should not be surprised if he proposed to-day. I only hope she will have the sense to accept him.”

“I tell you, Bertie, I won’t have it!” Lady

Julia is saying to Mr. Vansittart as the two men saunter up. "I have a splitting headache, and want nobody's society but my own. Talking would drive me mad, and I dare say I shall be better by the time you get back to tea. Anyhow, I *will* be left alone!"

The flush on her cheek may be the result of suffering, but the whole expression of her handsome face betokens that she is not in a mood to be contradicted. Bertie Vansittart pleads no more for leave to stay with her, while the others start on their expedition up the glen. He follows them, slowly, laggingly, and ostentatiously alone.

He wishes his imperious lady to see that he is miserable away from her, and it is not till he is half way up the glen that he quickens his steps to join the rest, and consoles himself in the society of one of the prettiest girls of the party.

Lady Julia, when she is left alone, does not weep, or wring her hands. She feels wrath and anger against the man who has promised and failed, rather than sorrow ; but, unfortunately, with a woman of her stamp,

opposition, or indifference, or disappointment, only adds fuel to the fire. Too much love would cloy; too great humility would only breed in her contempt for her victim. All those who are too eager to please her find her impassible. Had Brian Beresford hurried to the trysting-place, had he been over-eager to see his liege lady after thousands of miles of travel and many months' absence, her passion would have speedily cooled.

Now, as she paces under the great trees that border the avenue, her mind is filled with him, and him alone.

He has failed her—*her*—the great Lady Julia, and, strange as it may seem, she loves him all the better for it.

A light breeze straight from the sea, some miles away, bears on its bosom the fragrance of ozone and the wafted odours of the clover-fields across which it has passed; overhead the beech boughs almost interlace; the birds are carolling their spring songs; the wood-pigeons are cooing from the wood close at hand; ferns and way-side flowers carpet the turf, and the rabbits flit across the ride, un-

daunted by the sight of a stranger figure. Everything speaks of peace and happiness. It is a kind of earthly paradise, in which some might sigh to dwell for ever.

But to be alone in Eden is not the ideal of the stately lady who paces up and down. It does not, indeed, often happen to her to be left in perfect solitude, and it will not last long now ! For listen ! hark ! the sound of horse's hoofs falls on her ears. She has no time for wonder or suspense, for the next moment a horseman comes in sight, and when she sees that it is indeed Brian Beresford who is galloping towards her as quickly as his good horse will bring him, then her heart all but stops beating, and a great joy takes possession of her.

“ Brian ! Brian ! ” She is beyond speaking. She has nothing to say but his name, and she repeats that again and again, as if to assure herself that he is really in the flesh and at her side.

He flings himself off his horse, and seizes her hands in both of his, and they stand thus

looking into each other's faces without speaking for a minute or two.

When great friends or great enemies meet after a long absence, it is curious that they often cannot get out a word ; those who neither like nor dislike are full of phrases, of news, of small talk. Not so the others who have loved or hated overmuch : they are tongue-tied, and a silence as of death falls on them. It is Lady Julia who first breaks the spell, and once more the man may say, as so many men have said before him, "the woman tempted me," for it is she who leans nearer and nearer to him, and whose rose-red lips come dangerously near his own. Their handsome faces are close—too close together for strict propriety. Her large eyes, glowing with rich vitality and passionate love, are looking into his, and he would be more than mortal—at any rate he would not be Brian Beresford—were he to resist such an offer !

The kiss that is offered him so freely he takes, and as he clasps another man's wife in his arms he—like ninety-nine men out of a hundred—forgets the fair, youthful face that

has haunted his dreams by sea and land for so many months. He lives only in the present moment, and indeed, young and ardent as he is, how could it be otherwise? Lady Julia is a woman born to turn men's heads, and to fan the fire of all unlawful passions. She is indescribably alluring, and as Brian stands beside her the feelings of a year ago seem suddenly to return to him. It may be but a passing temptation, or it may hold him for life—but he is her slave once more. She breaks at last the happy silence. “And you, my darling,” she whispers, and her words sound like sweet music in her own ears, “you have remembered me, I do believe.”

“Remember you, Bijou! oh! people don't easily forget you! You *can't* be forgotten.” She leans towards him again, and once more their lips meet, and once more Lady Julia feels that if that kiss were a mortal sin it would still be worth the sinning. She has this excuse—she is fairly carried off her own feet and, at least, she does not sin from intention.

They walk side by side under the beeches ;

slowly they pace along and, though the golden days of childhood have long passed for both of them, like children they walk hand in hand.

Perhaps she has never in her life been happier than at this minute ; she even *knows* that she is happy ; and to how few of us is that knowledge given, for it is only when Fairyland is far behind us that we feel that we too have been in Arcadia.

“ You are glorious as ever, miladi,” says Brian, with admiring eyes. “ I have seen nothing like you since I left my native shores. I had forgotten, I think, how splendid you are. One must see you to realize your good looks.”

Such a greeting after such a long absence seems to her only natural and fitting. It is always the same—men always harp on about her beauty—it is the animal side of them that is touched—the lust of the eye alone that is gratified.

She might say, like the “ Queen Sidonian,”

“ My face made faint the face of man,”

and her ambition takes no higher flight.

That is all she wishes—all she hopes—and she looks for nothing more, for tribute to her beauty is sweeter to her soul than aught else.

She feels Brian's fingers thrill in her grasp, and she knows she has him under her spell again—that spell that was all but broken before he went away, but which she means to cast on him again, though she die for it.

She has never in her life felt quite sure of him ; he had all but escaped her once or twice, and she does not forget now how Vega Fitzpatrick had come between them last autumn ; but she undervalues the strength of the girl's attractions, and she has half forgotten the jealous pangs she felt in the *Gitana* last year.

Clever as she is, she does not quite know the heart of man yet, nor does she think it possible that as they walk there close together, as only lovers walk, his mind is even now wandering from her, and he has a question on his lips that he longs to ask, but his courage fails him.

They talk about her—about her wonderful

good looks—about all she has been doing of late, and a little, a very little, about himself and his travels ; but she does not care to hear about China or Japan, and now that he is back once more it is a matter of supreme indifference to her where he has been or what he has seen.

They are walking slowly side by side in the direction of the Castle, over the soft warm grass, the pleasant meads stretching out on both sides of the beech-fringed avenue. The bridle hangs loosely over Brian's arm, and his horse moves along at his side as slowly and contentedly as do the two friends who have just met.

Brian's content is perhaps too great for words, for silence falls on him at last ; miladi's white hand is dropped, the two goodly figures pace along side by side, and the torrent of their words is stayed.

"You must tell me about all my old friends," breaks out the young man suddenly, and his breath comes short and quick, as if he had been running fast. "You can't think how behind hand I am in news about

everybody. Of all the friends and relations who promised faithfully to keep me posted up in news only the Colonel stuck to his word. People won't bother about writing to any one so far away as I was. I suppose they think there are so many chances against one's coming home at all that one may as well be dropped at once. The Colonel was a brick, and wrote regularly. I *was* grateful, I can tell you. I wouldn't have missed his letters for the world; all the same, I am bound to say he didn't give me much information. His letters were full of hunting, and all that, which, of course, I liked to hear about, but I sometimes wished he had gone a little farther, and told me about some of my pals. Half my friends may be either dead or buried—or—or married for all I know—broke perhaps—that last is, I daresay, exactly what has happened to one or two of them."

"Who do you want to hear about first, Brian?" asks Lady Julia, in a constrained voice, and laughing a short, dry laugh. "Do you wish me to give you a full and particular account of all the uncles and aunts, and

sisters and cousins you may own, because, if so, it will take me a week, at any rate. Or do you wish a short memoir of all your friends and acquaintances? Their name is Legion. I am not equal to such a task. You must take it for granted that most of them are alive and kicking, or married, or broke, or dead, for all I know. But I suppose there are one or two very special people who are the objects of your young affections. Tell me their names, Brian, and I will break to you as gently as I can any bad news I know about them. Who knows but that they may be here with us to-day, for we know much the same lot of people."

She waits in eager expectation for him to speak. Surely a man like Brian will go straight to his point, and ask for the well-being of those most dear to him first of all.

She is dying to know the name that trembles on his lips. He has not been half an hour in her society, and she is already jealous of him ; yet she has had him utterly to herself, and even she cannot deny him the

right of having friends, or the privilege of hearing about them.

He does not answer her at once ; his eyes are on the short-cropped grass at their feet, while hers are fixed on his handsome, sun-burnt face. They were silent when they first met, but it is not the same kind of silence as now.

The dead, stupid pause is broken at last.

“ As you say, Lady Bijou, I have so many people to hear about,” cries Brian, rousing himself, and speaking in a tone and with a laugh in which even her ladyship’s jealous ears do not detect any particular agitation ; “ but one must begin somewhere. Tell me about the people who were on board the *Gitana* when we cruised about together last autumn.”

Quick as lightning does the image of Vega Fitzpatrick flash across Lady Julia’s eager brain ; but she is crafty, and temporizes—she will keep him in suspense as long as possible—she will watch him, and draw her own conclusions.

“ You expect a great deal from me, Brian,”

she says, with forced merriment. "Am I to begin at the beginning, and give you a full account of all the people we had on board the yacht from July to September? To do it thoroughly one would need to overhaul the log, or at least to send for the book in which all the visitors wrote their names. We could then go into it chapter and verse. But no, Brian. You don't want to hear about them all, or I am much mistaken. Be honest, and mention some of your particular favourites, and I will tell you what has come over them. Don't be nervous! I can relieve your mind at once by saying that, as far as I know, no great misfortune has fallen on any of our guests. None of them have joined the majority, or been married, or divorced, that I can remember, so begin without any misgiving."

"Well! the last lot of people you had on board just before I left—where have they all got to?" says Brian, with no more fencing or beating about the bush.

"Our last party on board the *Gitana*," repeats Lady Julia, mockingly, and some

more colour comes into her handsome face. "It was a very small one—only ourselves, and Cissy Grahame, and Miss Fitzpatrick. Which of the two am I to begin with?"

"Oh! Cissy Grahame is certain to be all right," he answers, growing careless of concealment. "But I should like to hear about—the other. Is she still at Dieppe? I asked the Colonel about her in half a dozen letters, but he never answered one of my questions. I am very anxious to hear about her," he goes on gravely, "for her story was such a miserable one. I don't know when I ever felt so sorry for any one. Tell me about her, Lady Julia."

His blue eyes are no longer gay or mirthful, but eager and troubled, as he turns them in her ladyship's direction. He does not get his answer just at once, for the very good reason that his companion cannot command her voice.

The words that she tries to speak choke her, and the jealous hatred of Vega which has slumbered, but has never died, returns with a rush.

Her own madness in having allowed the girl to remain among them to cross her path again, and her wrath when she finds that even in the first moments of their meeting Brian still thinks of her rival, are too much for her, and deprive her of the powers of utterance.

Some warning and mocking words of her sister's return to her memory. They have, no doubt, rankled in her mind for long, but she feels them now in their full truth. Added to all this she needs a moment's breathing space to settle what she shall say, and the false impression that she means to bring forth in words must be put into some shape.

"She, at least, has had many ups and downs," she answers at last, and she manages to make her voice sound much as usual. "The strangest part of it all is that we have had the pleasure of her society for I don't know how long. That dreadful Mr. Fitzpatrick—but no I suppose I must not call him dreadful now—died suddenly some time ago. It was no doubt an unmitigated blessing to every one concerned except our-

.

selves, but as he thought fit to commend his daughter to Reginald's care we were obliged to get her over to Conholt. I can't say the plan has been a very successful one. I never liked this Miss Vega, as you know, and I don't think the last few months have improved her. She is so forward and gushing, and she has a shocking manner to strangers. After all, what could one expect from a girl brought up anyhow in a foreign watering-place, by a disreputable man like Ralph Fitzpatrick? You can't imagine what a bother she has been to me—always clashing with Hermione's girls, and all that kind of thing. Thank Heaven," and here Lady Julia's voice grows harder, and more impressive as she expresses her gratitude to the higher powers, "my troubles are now over! She has managed to captivate that rich Mr. Mossop.

"You remember him, I am sure—a terrible little man, who bought The Towers a short time ago, and who has done it up lately in the most ludicrous way. Well, Miss Fitzpatrick has played her cards to

some purpose, and, in spite of my sister Hermione's frantic efforts to secure him for Dottie, she has won the game. They are as good as engaged: so 'all's well that ends well!'"

She now speaks easily, and her words actually have the ring of truth. Brian cannot but believe. Why should he not? What had ever passed between him and Vega to justify him in thinking—hoping—that she would still be free to listen to him?

How was she to know that he had never ceased to think of her, and that the wish to see her again had made him cut short his travels? If she had thought about him at all it would be as one who had amused himself by making love to her the short time they had been together, and then had left her, taking no farewell.

Lady Julia goes on: "It is very lucky, is it not? that things have turned out so well. Even Reginald is pleased, and I am overjoyed to be spared all further trouble, while she is indeed fortunate in making such a

rich marriage. No one is disappointed but Hermione,"—and she laughs maliciously.

Brian pulls himself together. The bolt has told ; but he is not the man to show his discomfiture.

"Are they really engaged ? Is it quite settled ? I can't imagine Miss Fitzpatrick throwing herself away in that fashion. For a girl of that sort to marry such a little cad is perfectly preposterous !"

"And where would she find any one better, my dear Brian ? Do be sensible for once, and try and see both sides of the question," counsels Lady Julia, who is notorious for being blindly one-sided. "Would you expect a duke to marry Ralph Fitzpatrick's daughter, and poor men of good family always look out for money themselves. No, no!—she has been lucky indeed, as you will say some day when she entertains you at The Towers !"

Lady Julia has talked so eagerly that for the moment she half believes what she is asserting ; but whether she did or not, she would say it all the same. They have now

reached the Castle, which seems still deserted, for the rest of the party have not returned from the glen. They stand for a moment at the principal entrance and are about to enter when her ladyship's white hand is laid on Brian's shoulder. She half holds him back as she points across the court to a window on whose broken sill the subject of their conversation is sitting. Miss Fitzpatrick has mounted on the embrasure, while Mr. Mossop, who is on a lower tier of stones, looks as if he were kneeling at her feet. The girl's face is turned from him and from them, but there is no mistaking the expression that his broad, middle-aged countenance wears. It betokens love!—as much love as such an uninteresting face is capable of showing. He is gazing up at her—gaping rather—and his small eyes, embedded in fat, seem as if they could not stare enough at the slim, supple young figure, and the little bit of white chin and rounded cheek which is all he sees of his lady's face. The pose of her figure is careless and easy; she may be weary of Mr.

Mossop and bored by his companionship, but at least she does not look it, and his feelings are unmistakable. No one could be deceived who took the trouble of looking at him.

Lady Julia utters a dumb thanksgiving. The Devil himself must have been at work to help to give her lying words a semblance of truth. Brian has now only to look and judge for himself; no fear of his disbelieving her story now! They stand for two or three minutes gazing at those who look so like a pair of lovers. Vega never turns her head, and as for Mr. Mossop, he is utterly oblivious to everything but his companion. There is no possibility of mistaking his feelings either. Thick-set, stumpy, middle-aged as he is, any one can see that he is a victim to the tender passion. Brian would be blind indeed if he doubted now what Lady Julia has already told him. Once more her white hand rests on Brian's shoulder, and laying her finger on her lips with the air of one who would not willingly interrupt a serious flirtation she moves away with almost

ostentatious care and prudence. Beresford must needs follow her ; she has left him no option ; but it is with a heavy heart that he does so.

For a man who has just come home after so many months' absence his silence and dulness is very noticeable when the rest of the party join them.

He is glad to see Colonel Damer ; but Colonel Damer wonders what can have happened to his friend Brian at the other side of the world to have taken all the spirit out of him.

Cissy Grahame, as she shakes hands with him, gives him one glance out of her keen eyes, and draws some conclusion not very far from the truth. Lady Hermione scents battle in the air, and hopes to reap some personal advantage out of the hurly-burly ! All the party are gathered together in a group, and at last the laggards join the rest. Mr. Mossop's air of proprietorship, as he walks beside his lovely companion, annoys some of the other men of the party as well as Brian Beresford. He is swelling with

satisfaction and importance. Things must have gone very well with him to-day, and he looks positively obnoxious in his prosperity.

So, in this crowd and in this fashion, does Vega meet at last the man who has filled her thoughts for so many weary months.

Her sweet face turns rosy red—her lovely eyes are filled with a great joy, and she stretches out her hands to him. It would be nearly impossible to mistake or misjudge her feelings. Brian does both. He believes that her blushes are called forth by other causes, and he has already said to himself that he will not enter the lists with Mr. Mossop.

His greeting to Vega is coldly—calmly polite. He lifts his hat—he holds her hand for a moment—he says the banal sentences that are a hundred times more crushing than utter silence—and Vega takes the hint.

The colour leaves her face as quickly as it had mounted there—leaves her, indeed, ghastly pale for a moment; and then, recovering herself as well as she is able, she follows Mr. Mossop obediently to a distant

window which he credits with an extensive view.

“ ‘ The Lord hath delivered thee into my hand,’ ” thinks Lady Julia, in the spirit, if not in the words, of David, as she watches their retreating figures, and she binds Brian Beresford to her side, as a man may sometimes be bound who has failed to touch the supreme good, and falls back on the lesser.

“ Where has everybody gone ? ” asks Vega, in surprise, half an hour later, as she and her companion come back once more to the Castle, after a ramble of Mr. Mossop’s contriving through the woods.

The Castle is not only deserted, but its strong, iron - barred gate is locked and bolted. There is no sign of life anywhere. The crumbling walls no longer echo to the sound of merry voices, and gaily-clad figures no longer flit about like birds on the wing.

“ What is the meaning of this ? ” says Mr. Mossop, almost at the same moment. “ They are all off ! They have left us in the lurch ! We shall have to follow them to the station as quickly as we can. I blame

myself greatly for the discomfort and fatigue of your hurried walk, Miss Fitzpatrick," he adds, with heavy politeness, as the two hurry across the fields in the direction of the railway station.

The girl's light figure seems made for active motion—there is not much fear of her elastic step flagging. It is he himself who "makes bad weather of it," and puffs and pants as they brush through the long grass, and he climbs the numerous stiles that seem set there on purpose to annoy an elderly gentleman, whose thick-set figure has lost any little spring it may once have possessed.

As he alights heavily on the ground after each obstacle has been surmounted, and, out of breath with the exertion, tries to keep up with his companion, who is hurrying along in real earnest, he feels acutely his age and weight as contrasted with her youth and nimbleness ; and by the time they arrive at the little road-side station he is thoroughly put out.

But the same quiet reigns here that they found at the Castle.

What does it all mean? Where is the much-talked-about "special"? Where are Lady Julia, her large party, the attendant servants, and the fringe of boys and "odd men" who have made themselves useful in carrying hampers and rugs and all the other "properties" of the pic-nic? Why is there but one man—and he an apparently incapable and surly one—to be seen at all? and why should he be stretched in indolence and as much ease as the narrow bench of the railway-shed can afford, smoking his pipe, and cutting his nails with a clasp-knife?

"What is the meaning of all this?" asks Mr. Mossop, loudly and authoritatively—the quick walk has put him thoroughly out of temper; and, being scant of breath, his words sound as if jerked out. "What are you doing here all alone, my good fellow? Why is the ticket-office closed? and where is the special train?"

The porter half sits up, his hob-nail boots leave the bench, his clasp-knife is shut with a jerk, and he pulls himself together some-

what, though his manner is by no means conciliatory.

“ One question at a time, mister,” he says, with heavy familiarity. “ Which on ’em shall it be fust ? ”

Mr. Mossop looks as if he would like to eat him ; but he restrains himself.

“ Where has the ‘special’ got to ? ” he inquires, with forced calm.

“ Where be ‘speshul’ got to ? ” repeats the man after him. “ Oh, it be got half way to Barrowton by now—leastways, as far as I can say, for it’s hard to tell for sartin about them kind o’ trains.”

“ Gone ! gone !! ” says Mr. Mossop, his eyes almost starting out of his head. “ But where are the rest of our party ? Where has everybody got to ? ”

“ *The* party as ordered the ‘speshul’ has gone *in* the ‘speshul.’ Whether it be your party or no, I carn’t say. They never missed nobody ! They wouldn’t have been likely to leave no one behind, so I expect it was *not* your party.”

“ This man has been drinking,” whispers

Mr. Mossop to Vega—which, indeed, was perfectly true, and on the excellent vintage of '79 champagne, of which a bottle had been abstracted by him out of an ill-fastened hamper.

Aloud he asks him, "What are we to do? Can we get another 'special'?"

"Haw, haw! that *is* a good 'un," laughs the porter, evidently much tickled at the idea. "If you was the Prince of Wales himself we couldn't do that for you. Why, there's no train and no telegraph-orphis and no station-master here! He went home the minute the 'speshul' left—yes, you can look for yerself, if yer don't believe me," as Mr. Mossop peers into the ticket-office, in which is a large-faced clock, a small desk, a wooden chair, and naught else—"I will be away myself in a few minutes."

"And when will the next—the ordinary train—be here?" asks Vega in trembling accents. She has already taken fright at the prospect before her.

Heavily does the porter struggle to his feet, and without troubling himself to answer

he runs a great dirty thumb down the side of a large time-table that hangs like a picture on the walls of the shed. His powers of reading are limited, and he makes one or two mistakes about the Up and the Down lines, but he finally finds what he is looking for. "At 6 A.M., little Missy," he answers; "that means at 6 to-morrow mornin'. That's the fust down train that stops here; it ——"

"D—— it all!" interrupts Mr. Mossop, breathless with wrath and excitement; "and do you mean to tell me we shall have to wait here all night?"

"Wait where you will," answers the man, sulkily, "it's all one to me."

"And not seven o'clock yet. The thing is impossible—quite impossible," storms Mr. Mossop. "Where can I get a carriage? I suppose we are at least forty miles from Conholt, Miss Fitzpatrick, but we must post home."

"There's naught o' that sort to be done here," returns the porter; "naw, indeed, there's not a chay in the whole place, unless it be Mr. Attrill's light cart, and quality as

looks for speshuls 'ull never come down to that."

"Is there an hotel of any sort in the village, then, where we could stay for the night? I fear, I very much fear, Miss Fitzpatrick, that is the only thing to be done."

"There be'ant no ho-tel—leastways onless you calls the 'Turk's Head' one, and you and the young lady couldn't sleep in the bar! To be sure, there's Mrs. Mew at Hurdleford Farm, she do take in lodgers now and again, but she's very particular, is Mrs. Mew, and onless you had references—ay! and good ones, too—she wouldn't so much as look at you."

"Well, what in the world is to happen to us?" says Vega, half weeping. "You know the country about here. What do you advise us to do?"

"Why, if you puts it like that, Missy, I'll tell you fair and square what's yer best way out o' the hobble. There's Great Pedlington, that's no more nor four, or maybe five, miles from here. You take your foot in your hand and walk there. You'll be there

by nine o'clock at latest, and then you can put up at the 'Bugle.' That's sommat like an ho-tel, that is, and to-morrow morning early you can take the train and get back to yer friends, and no one will be none the wiser. Well, I maun be off now, or my missus 'ull want to know the reason why." And with that the conversation ends, and he lurches out of the station, leaving the two alone once more.

It is not Vega's way to weep or complain; she is made of stronger stuff than that, but her spirit fails her as she thinks of the prospect in front of them—a prospect which includes the return to Conholt the next morning and her ladyship's reception of the wanderers!

"How *could* they have forgotten us?" she asks Mr. Mossop. "Surely some one might have seen that we had been left behind! It was very unkind of them, and very unfortunate for us. What in the world shall we do?"

"We can't stay here all night, at any rate," returns Mr. Mossop, "and I don't think

we have much choice. We had better follow that lout's advice, and walk to Great Pedlington. I don't know the way, but I suppose we can find out. I am awfully sorry for *you*, Miss Fitzpatrick. It was too bad of them not to look after *you*, at any rate."

Vega has been out in the open air all day, and she can hardly drag one foot after another before they arrive at their destination. Not only do the five miles seem particularly long ones, but they miss their way two or three times. The lanes—sunk as they are between high banks, crowned by tall, straggling hedges, green, leafy, and overgrown, which shut out all view of the surrounding country—soon grow dark. Great Pedlington may be a hundred miles away for all they can tell, and they plough on through the gathering dusk in a hopeless sort of way.

Mr. Mossop is a most dispiriting companion as he groans over the chapter of accidents that has brought them to this pass, and Vega, tired and footsore, walks at last in total silence by his side.

Fortune has played her a nasty trick this time. It seems as if it was quite impossible for her ever to be done with Mr. Mossop! He had stuck to her the whole day. She had never been able to shake him off, and now she finds herself in what is really a compromising position with the man who, of all others, bores her, and whose fatuous attentions and pompous good-nature annoy her more than she can express.

On they trudge—the light is really going now—and the street lamps—few, indeed, and dim, of Great Pedlington—are already lighted before the weary wanderers walk up its ill-paved street and find themselves at the door of the “Bugle.”

The Grimstone porter seems to have overrated its splendour, but it looks at least fairly passable, and they enter its narrow hall, half blocked up with bagmen’s bundles, and approach the bar-window, out of which a sour-faced spinster of an uncertain age is looking.

Their appearance so late at night, and without luggage of any kind, does not com-

mend itself to her, and she looks critically from the red-faced man who stands there so awkwardly, and whose clothes are a mass of dust, to the young girl in the draggled dusty frock, whose pale face is so woe-begone and miserable.

These are not the usual customers of the "Bugle," an establishment which, above all things, is respectable, and they do not find favour in her eyes.

"Dinner!" she repeats doubtfully, as if Mr. Mossop had asked for something utterly unheard of and impossible, "I don't see how it can be done at this time of night. Perhaps you can have a cut off the cold sirloin in the coffee-room, but I don't think we can do more than that for you; as for bedrooms, I don't know what to say about it at all; what rooms do you want?"

Mr. Mossop is accustomed to be bowed down to and all but worshipped at the different hotels that he honours with his custom. Ostentatiously large tips endear him to waiters and housemaids, while the landlords, to use their own words, "put up with his

bounce ” in consideration of undisputed bills, and fabulous charges that are never even read over. He feels the difference keenly now.

“ I am Mr. Mossop!—Mr. Mossop of The Towers!” he says, full of fussy annoyance. But the fame of The Towers has not reached Great Pedlington, and conveys nothing to the barmaid’s mind. She does not blench when he testily asks for an interview with the landlord, a fat, good-natured man, who presently appears on the scene with the air of one who has been disturbed in an after-dinner nap. He is more impressed with Mr. Mossop’s importance than with his subordinate, for he at least has seen The Towers marked on the map of the county which hangs in the bar.

The result is, that a kind of scratch dinner is served up for them in the coffee-room, and fires are lighted in two ill-ventilated bedrooms, whose stuffiness betokens that people eat and drink oftener than they sleep under that roof.

Vega sits opposite Mr. Mossop at a small

table ; the dinner is bad ; some belated bagmen have been dining freely at the next table, and their talk, not to mention their smug smiles and meaning leers in her direction, annoy her almost as much as does the dirty waiter who will insist in calling her to Mr. Mossop “ your good lady ! ”

“ We *must* go home by the very first train,” says Vega, before she says good-night to her companion, and mounts the grimy wooden stairs that lead to a bedroom that smells of apples. “ Please let us get away first thing to-morrow morning, as soon as we possibly can.”

Mr. Mossop is a heavy sleeper, and by no means given to early rising ; he does not see the point of getting up at six in the morning, and stands out for the eight train—a delay that Miss Fitzpatrick, much against her will, has to agree to.

All night long has she longed for the morning light and for the moment when she should find herself once more at Conholt ; but she does not feel very joyful once she gets there. No one is downstairs when she

arrives, and the public rooms are in possession of the housemaids. Is it her fancy or not, that they look up at her as she passes them with half-concealed amusement, and stare just a little at her draggled frock, the golden locks that have been twisted up under her hat with more haste than care, and her generally woe-begone appearance?

The idea crimsones her cheeks, and she feels shame—shame for nothing! She no longer rejoices that her troubles are over, that Mr. Mossop and she have parted company at last, and that her adventure—a stupid, dreary one, indeed—is ended, for she dimly sees that the worst of her troubles are before her. She mounts the great front staircase, and the steep back one, making straight for the schoolroom, where Pussie and Dottie receive her in their usual characteristic manner. Pussie, as usual, is dull and apathetic, and it seems all one to her if her companion has been out all night or if she ever comes back at all.

She takes no interest in any one, hardly even in herself.

All she seems to ask from life is peace—peace, and an unlimited supply of three-volumed novels. Dottie, on the other hand, is brimful of curiosity ; she dashes up to the travel-stained and dejected-looking figure standing at the door, drags her to the sofa, and simply overpowers her with questions. She hangs on every word of Vega's, so anxious is she to hear every particular of her adventure.

She at least is not callous, she is even a little sorry, and there is some humanity in her voice, as she says frankly, but not unkindly : “ I wouldn't be in your shoes, Vega, for the whole world. Aunt Julia is simply rampant, and I am afraid you'll have an awful time of it with her.”

CHAPTER III.

“I’ve seen your stormy seas, and stormy women,
And pity lovers rather more than seamen !”

It is fortunate that unmitigated sinners and immaculate saints are almost equally rare, for it would be hard to say which would be the most trying.

Sinners without a redeeming grace, and saints warranted never to sin, would be equally monotonous. Indeed most of our actions, whether their principal bias is in favour of good or evil, have in them cross currents of virtue or vice, which stultify their simplicity and singleness of purpose.

Lady Julia Damer would have considered herself incapable of attempting to compromise a girl, and that girl one who was living under her own roof ; and she could

have *all but* denied on oath any share in the accident that threw Vega Fitzpatrick into the society of Mr. Mossop the day of the pic-nic, and left her unprotected and alone in his company; and her denial would have been all but true.

She laid no deep plot, she hatched no cunning plan, and it was no part of her duty to herd her guests or to search for the stray ones.

All the same she *knew*—knew before the special left the little road-side station—that Vega Fitzpatrick was not in it. She did not want to know beyond a doubt. She carefully avoided making a certainty of it, and even to her own mind she tried to slur over the possibility that the girl was missing.

Missing indeed! How could that be? Surely everyone had gathered in the Castle yard before they started, or if there had been any laggards it must have been found out on the road to the station.

At any rate she could not be expected to turn herself into a kind of whipper-in to her party. People must look out for themselves

and she knew nothing about the occupants of the other saloon of the special.

As she sat with a frown on her brow in the corner of her own particular carriage she tried to persuade herself that she did *not* know that Vega was missing.

She made herself certain of that point when they reached the Conholt Park Station ; but she held her peace, and it was not till the weary party had reached home again that a hue and cry for the lost girl was made.

Colonel Damer was horribly annoyed. He could not understand how her absence had not been noticed before, and his reproaches to his wife were very unfortunate, for it gave her a chance of venting her wrath on some one, and in a measure of excusing herself to her own conscience.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” was the burden of her defence ; and as most of the guests took it for granted that Mr. Mossop was engaged to Vega it did not seem to them such a serious business after all. Many jokes indeed were made on the subject, and there was a great deal of talk about

it—talk that Vega would have bitterly resented, for it all turned on the certainty that Mr. Mossop was her affianced husband.

There is a knock at the schoolroom door about an hour after Vega has gained its friendly shelter, a rustle of silk as it opens, and her ladyship's own maid, the great Pinman, enters, her head in the air, and her thin, bony hands folded stiffly in front of her, not sorry to be the bearer of an unpleasant message to Miss Fitzpatrick. She neither likes nor dislikes Vega particularly, though she has all an upper servant's objection to anyone in the slightest degree an interloper, and she has also, in common with many other spinsters of forty, an instinctive aversion to anything particularly good-looking and attractive. But she does not forget the high words that passed at breakfast this morning in the housekeeper's room, between herself and the housekeeper on one side and the butler and the Colonel's own man, on the subject of Vega's misadventure, when the ladies had taken high ground.

“If it had been one of the housemaids who had stayed out all night without leave,” quoth Mrs. Titmass with authority, “I should have had a word or two to say on the subject. She would have had to suit herself pretty quick. Conholt Park wouldn’t have been the place for her, and, so far as I know, there isn’t one law for our betters and one for our inferiors.” Mrs. Titmass brackets herself in neither class, but evidently considers that housekeepers are a race apart. “I know nothing about this Miss Fitzpatrick as the Colonel has taken up, and I’ll take your word, Mr. Bickerstaff, that she’s pretty, but if it’s her way to rampage about the country all night with a single gentleman, well, all I can say is, *her* ways are not *my* ways—no, nor Miss Pinman’s either, are they, dear?” which, all things considered, is not very wonderful!

Pinman remembers all this as she stands at the schoolroom door, and the tone of voice in which she addresses Miss Fitzpatrick is sour and harsh. “Her ladyship’s compliments, and she would be obliged if

Miss Fitzpatrick would step down to her boudoir in about half an hour."

Vega turns pale, and her large eyes are full of fear as she looks at Pinman's inscrutable face.

"What is going to happen, Pinman?" asks Dottie boldly, for long familiarity with her aunt's maid has cast out fear, and Pinman, who has known her from infancy and watched her through her beauty stage, when she made such an excellent chaperon to her mother, up to her present neglected girlhood, has always had a certain sort of affection for Miss Dottie. "Don't look so cross, Pinny," she goes on, "but tell us what you know. Is aunt Julia very angry? I wouldn't be you, Vega, at the present moment, for anything you could give me. She can't kill you, and that's about all that can be said."

"What nonsense you do talk, Miss Dottie, to be sure," returns Pinman. "If folks behave themselves properly they have no cause to be afraid of her ladyship, or anyone else, for that matter;" and she stalks

stiffly from the room, glad to have been able to fire a parting shot on the side of virtue.

“Oh! here you are,” says Lady Julia, as Vega, with trembling footsteps, enters her boudoir half an hour later, “back at last! I really thought you were not coming back to Conholt any more. May I inquire when you returned here—where you got to, and what you were about last night?”

Lady Julia’s trumpet gives forth no uncertain sound—it is the note of battle, and as such does Vega understand it. So does Lady Hermione, who is sitting in the window, knitting as if for dear life. She smiles a mysterious smile to herself as she hears her sister’s words, for she knows she is not one to let her victim off easily. Lady Julia’s slumbers were not sweet last night—her angry feelings would not let her rest, and her conscience would not be lulled into quiescence; she is jaded and weary this morning, and not in a mood to be likely to err on the side of clemency.

“It was all an accident—all a mistake,” says Vega, in a very shaky voice. Her

courage will come back to her soon, but just at first she is daunted. "You know, Lady Julia, that I couldn't help it."

"That is what people always say when they have done something very outrageous," returns Lady Julia, who, for about the first time in her life, finds herself ranged on the side of respectability; "perhaps it doesn't strike you as anything so very dreadful to stay out all night long in the company of a young man." (Lady Hermione's smile almost becomes a laugh as she hears Mr. Mossop thus described!) "It is all a question of bringing up. Such behaviour may be all right at Dieppe, but it won't do here. The whole place is ringing with it. The very servants are scandalized."

Vega is no meek saint, and her spirit rises when she hears herself so unjustly accused, and condemned with such wicked harshness. It is in a voice almost as firm as Lady Julia's own that she answers her: "You *know* it was not my fault, Lady Julia. You *know* I would have given anything rather than such a thing should have happened. I have

been perfectly miserable ever since the moment when I found you had gone away and left me behind with Mr. Mossop ; but if it was all to come over again, I couldn't help it, and you know I couldn't."

"The girl shows fight," thinks her opponent, and in her heart of hearts she respects her for it. Aloud she says : " It's a bad business, all the same—a very bad business. Many a girl has lost her character for less. Whether you were in the wrong or not, is a matter that rests entirely with your own conscience. What the world will say is my affair ; for though you and I are nothing to each other, still, as long as you remain under this roof, there must be no scandal of any sort. I shall make it my business to stop all the talk and the gossip ; but even I can only stop it in one way, and that way I have no doubt you perfectly understand."

"No, Lady Julia, indeed I don't," says the girl, in a happier tone, for the conversation seems to have taken a pleasanter turn, and the fury of the battle is already spent.

"It may be all very pretty to pose as the

innocent," sneers Lady Julia, "but you must be perfectly aware of Mr. Mossop's feelings towards you, Miss Fitzpatrick. He has not taken very much trouble to conceal them. He never left your side yesterday, and everybody insisted then that you must be engaged to him. Fortunately, I neither confirmed nor denied the idea. I have only to say now that they were right, that you are really going to marry him, and all the ill-natured gossip over your escapade falls to the ground. It will even be considered rather a good joke that an engaged couple were so oblivious of time that they forgot everything when they were together. It is one thing to wander about the country with your affianced husband, and quite another thing to be missing with a man who is nothing in the world to you. In one case you have only enjoyed a somewhat premature *tête-à-tête*—in the other you lose your character."

"But—but," stammers Vega, her composure breaking a little, and speaking in quick, scared tones, "you mustn't say anything of the sort. Mr. Mossop is nothing to

me—I don't want to have anything to do with him."

"My dear young lady," says Lady Julia, looking her full in the face, her black eyes flashing at the bare idea that anyone so young, so friendless, and so dependent should have the audacity to stand up against her, "you must look matters steadily in the face. You have got into a mess, and you must get out of it as best you can. You have no option; there is no alternative, so far as I can see. You have been imprudent—singularly imprudent, let us say. No! no! I don't want an argument, and I refuse to enter into a wordy war with you about the amount of blame that should fall to your share. Whether innocent or guilty, no one can afford to compromise themselves as you have done. But even if one puts all that on one side, may I inquire what your future plans are? Your visit to us must come to an end some day. Where do you think of going?"

Where, indeed? The child is friendless—poor—utterly alone; and for such there is little hope in this world.

Tears fill her eyes—all the colour leaves her sweet cheeks, and forsakes her lips but now so dewy red—she hides her poor little face in her hands, and weeps. Who has she to turn to? No one—no one in this world, and heaven seems a long way off.

Lady Hermione looks up from her knitting for a moment. Just so might the *tricoteuses*, who sat in the Place de la Republique (late Louis Quinze), have stopped in their work, as they watched the Aristocrats mounting the fatal ladder, and counted the heads as they rolled into the basket.

There is no more feeling in her heart than there was in theirs.

The needles cease to click, and she marks the progress of events—that is all!

Lady Julia is hardly as unfeeling, although her temper is less under her control, and she is more violent than her sister.

“Come, come! this is all nonsense, Miss Fitzpatrick,” she says in not quite such harsh and dictatorial tones as she has spoken in before. “You are not a fool, by

any means ; and you must know I am only speaking for your own good. Putting the very unfortunate incident of last night entirely on one side—you must surely see that, in your position, a home—and a pleasant one—and a husband—and a very rich one—are not to be despised ! Mr. Mossop will make you perfectly happy. He has already spoken to me half a dozen times about you, and you must let me tell him it is all right.”

Vega looks up. What does it matter what happens to such a friendless creature as herself ? What chance has she ever had in this world ? Where is deliverance to come from ?

She sees but one way of escape, and that but a poor one ; still she must not throw it away.

“ Give me a week to make up my mind, Lady Julia,” she says in a low, but resolute, voice. “ I must have a week ”—for she remembers the promises of her Dieppe friends, the Bushes, and she means to see what they can do for her.

So the interview ends. Lady Julia tries to make herself believe that she has had Vega's good at heart, and that real kindness to the girl has inspired her words. She also tries to make Lady Hermione believe the same ; but the unbelieving smile returns to her sister's face, and she does not go on trying for long.

A pitiful little letter leaves Conholt the same evening, addressed to Major Bushe. Perhaps, indeed, it would have been more politic if Vega had not made it quite so pitiful, or told them how forlorn she was—letting them see that her return to Dieppe and to them would make a regular break between herself and Lady Julia.

Mrs. Bushe has a strong instinct of self-preservation ; and reads between the lines that their guest would not be a very paying one.

The Bushe family, to whom an annual crisis has ever been part of their financial year, and an event which, though unpleasant, is only to be expected, have just

passed through one or more than usual severity.

Creditors have battered at the doors of "Mongplaisir," writs from the remote County Clare have come to them from over the seas, and "everyone has been down on them at once," in the words of Major Bushe, who speaks of his duns in much the same spirit of pious resignation that an early Christian would have alluded to the wild animals who were about to tear him limb from limb.

In few words, the Bushes are at the lowest of low-water mark, and things are in such a bad way that they are on the eve of a move to "fresh woods and pastures new."

"Mongplaisir" will soon be a thing of the past, to be referred to when the bygone glories of the Bushe family are the subject of conversation, and to be enlarged and beautified by imagination till it becomes almost unrecognizable, and as much touched up as are the glowing pictures of Ballymassaggart. In other words, they mean to shake the dust of Dieppe from their

shoes, and to leave that ungrateful place to take care of itself.

Mrs. Bushe and the girls have set their hearts on going to Nancy, which, according to Mrs. Bushe, combines the advantages of “food moderate, and wine just for nothing, the cheapest furnished apartments in all France, and the best of military society for Norah and Annabella.”

Major Bushe objects to their choice principally for the reason that he does not believe that a soul in the County Clare knows anything about the place, and that, at any rate, he will stake his existence that “not a bhoy in the barony of Ballymassaggart” has ever heard of the important fortified town of Nancy!

The Misses Bushe, however, overrule this objection by reminding their father that, as he has had, to quote his own words, “divil a ha’p’orth of rint” from Ballymassaggart in the last ten years, the views of its inhabitants, as regards their place of residence, need not be studied. Nay, more! that as the good-natured Major would be

very likely to be made into a mark for his attached tenantry to shoot at, should he ever set his foot in the barony again, they were free to live at Nancy, even should the whole of the County Clare profess its ignorance of such a place !

“ An’ could we not take the pore little gy-url—pore little Vega—along with us, if we do go to that outlandish place ? Why shouldn’t the choild go to Nancy with us, if Nancy it is to be ? ’

Mrs. Bushe is the mouthpiece of her daughters, who have scouted the very idea of another girl—and that one a great deal better - looking than themselves — being added to their already over-long train. She also, poor soul, does not feel inclined to bind another burden on her already over-weighted shoulders, and to add a non-paying member to their family circle.

“ It’s not to be thought of, Domenic, at all—at all,” says his Jemima with some asperity ; “ ar’n’t we just worn out and kilt entirely by trying to make ends meet as it is ? They never *do* meet—they can’t—but

if the gap between the two ends gets any bigger, why! we'll be in a greater mess than we are now. No, no! Domenic; charity begins at home, and till we are all back again at Ballymassaggart, we mustn't even think of entertaining."

If Vega's visit is postponed till they return to that tumble-down abode, and till the gates of the "demesne" once more "rowl back" to receive the rightful Lords of the Soil, it is likely to be put off for ever. Mrs. Bushe, however, really does believe in their eventual return, though even she considers it vague enough to make it safe for them to defer Vega's visit till then.

"Sit down, Domenic, and write the poor little girl a letter—do as I tell you, now. You must give her good advice; and tell her to stay where she is, and not to take it into her head to quarrel with koind friends. They *are* koind friends to her, Domenic, whatever ye may say. The Colonel was too high and mighty, and too English altogether for my taste, but thin all the English that I have ever seen were cold and formal like that.

It's not their faults, poor things. All the same, he was a good sort of man, and Vega ought to thank her stars she is where she is. She is living on the fat of the land, and their stiff ways can be nothing to her, for she's as stiff as they are. Here's a pen, Domenic, and here's a sheet of foine white paper, and now if we could only get some ink—Melanie! Melanie! de l'en-ker pour Monsieur le Major! Oh! here it is," as Melanie enters, stirring the ink bottle with a hen's feather, for, the fluid having run short, "a drain of water" is the usual recipe at "Mon Plaisir" to make up in quantity what it lacks in blackness. "Now begin, Domenic dear." So Domenic begins. Like most Irishmen he has a ready pen as well as a ready tongue, and he is so enamoured with his own wisdom, and the "iligant" way in which he expresses himself, that he makes his letter longer than he at first intended.

"I was right glad to hear from you, my dear girl," it begins, "and to find that in all your splendour and grandeur you have still a thought to waste on the poor Bushes. And you have no better friends, my dear, though I say it as shouldn't. You are just like one

of the family, and I wish indeed that we could welcome you back to little Mon Plaisir. But, alas! Mon Plaisir is a thing of the past. Even this humble roof has been torn from over our heads, and we are driven from the home we love so well, by the unkindness and spite of those with whom we have dealt for the last ten years. I have been on the best of terms with them all, and now they turn on me and rend me. The long and the short of it is, Vega, that we must fly—fly to Nancy. I don't mean any joke. It is to no female acquaintance that a respectable married man like me would turn in his need, but to the large garrison town of Nancy, in the Department of—well! shure, I've clean forgot what Department it's in, and what odds if I have? No one wants to know! Anyhow! we're going to settle there. The girls want a little fun, and small blame to them at their age—indeed they've long had their eye on a place where there were plenty of soldiers, and they tell me that Nancy's alive with them. Perhaps, too, the tradespeople there will know a gentleman when they see him, and not come down on me for a trifle just when they know I can't raise a halfpenny. But it will be a hand-to-mouth existence just at first, my dear, and I wouldn't think it right to take you from all the glories of this world, and all the grandeurs you now enjoy, and ask you to share it. No, no, Vega! you're better where you are, and that you may never be worse off, is the earnest prayer of

“Your affectionate, but unfortunate friend,

“DOMENIC BUSHE.

“P.S.—I know the Colonel is always on the look-out for pictures, and what little Denis here calls ‘brickle-brackle.’ Will you ask him, with my compliments, if he

would feel inclined to make an offer for two fine family portraits, at least eighty years old, and the work of the great Mahoney? You'd be doing us both a good turn, my darling, if you could arrange it. The Colonel would have two grand works of art, which I never thought to part with, and I would be the better of a little ready money, once I get to Nancy."

CHAPTER IV.

IT was but a forlorn hope to expect help from the Bushes ; but when Vega reads the Major's letter she feels as if her last chance were gone.

She gets it on the evening of a day when all the house is in a bustle, except indeed the inmates of the schoolroom, who are more neglected than ever. Lady Julia is going to give a dance, prior to the break-up of her smart Whitsuntide party, and her own departure to town ; a dance which does not include the "frumps" who dwell around, but at which almost all the guests will be of Lady Julia's own world.

"Surely when one comes down to the country for Whitsuntide one has every right to amuse oneself," has been her answer to her husband, when he suggested the names

of a few neighbours who had always been friends of the family, and who, in common politeness, should be asked. "At Christmas—even at Easter—one has to sacrifice oneself and ask the rag-tag and bobtail, but this is a small dance, and for once in a way got up for our own amusement. I utterly refuse to have it spoilt."

"You'll make a good lot of enemies by it, I expect," says Colonel Damer, grimly; "but you must please yourself. And Mossop," he says, looking over her list once more, "is he not good enough? After all the use you make of him, I wonder you have the face to leave him out. I thought you intended to sacrifice poor little Vega to him. You told me they were as good as engaged. How can you pass him over?"

"I'll tell you how," says Lady Julia, looking her husband full in the face, for she is far too imperious a lady to allow her plans to be criticised. "He's been sent to London—by me—for a week. Vega, as you say, is practically engaged to him, but, like the regular country miss, she wishes to make

herself all the more valued by keeping him on tenter-hooks. She says he shall have his answer in a week. He knows, she knows, we all know, what that answer will be. She is the last girl to say 'No' to eight thousand a year, and 'The Towers' to boot; but if she likes to play the part of the second-rate coquette, well! it hurts no one. I am to see him in town in a day or two, when I get up, and am to give him the girl's answer, which, in plain English, will be *yes*. In the meantime, I get off having him at my dance to-night, where he would have been utterly out of place. Ha! ha! Fancy Mr. Mossop in a domino and mask."

"A domino and mask. My dear Julia, what on earth are you talking about?" asks the Colonel, looking very much surprised.

"Oh! did I not tell you," says her ladyship, carelessly, "that Lady Gornaway wrote begging for masks and dominoes for the first half of the evening. She said it would be so very amusing, and could only be done at a small dance where there were no out-

siders. I thought it was a capital idea, so I mean to carry it out. Don't look so afflicted, Reginald, it won't affect you. The ladies only are to be masqued ; it will be rather fun to "intriguer" the men ; Lady Gornaway won't let the grass grow under her feet, I expect."

It seems to be always the lot of the three girls to look on while their elders and betters amuse themselves, and this evening, as usual, Pussie and Dottie Langton, and Vega Fitzpatrick, are spectators of the revels in which they may not join. They are well amused, however, as they stand in their usual corner in the gallery that encircles the round hall and watch the arrival on the scene of masqued and muffled ladies, and mystified men. Lady Julia has called it a small ball, but the hall soon fills, for the guests arrive with unusual punctuality, and evidently wish to take part in the fun from the beginning.

Though a domino may be but a shapeless disguise, and though the plainest face in the world may be hidden by a black mask, provided only the lace that conceals the

mouth be long enough, still, a masked ball is a brilliant sight—at any rate, to look down on ! Subdued shades are not the order of the day, nor artistically-blended tints. One colour, and one alone, is affected by each reveller, and they all seem to have been chosen for their brightness and brilliancy. The whole scene in the hall, where they are to dance, is one of gaiety ; and its setting is in keeping with the occasion. Round each crested helmet and burnished breast-plate and shield and spear that hang on the panelled walls of the round hall are twined wreaths of roses, and the oak railing of the gallery where the girls stand is garlanded with flowers ; the floor looks black and shining, like the keenest ice ; the musicians are in a recess : everything is ready. And now the guests arrive.

Here come two white dominoes—dominoes which are not so very shapeless after all ; for, somehow, no one can have any doubt that their wearers are slim and slender, or that the heads are pretty ones, round which white lace mantillas are twisted, and which

droop over faces which they entirely hide. There is an atmosphere of "pretty woman" about these white figures which is not belied by the lovely feet in fairy shoes embroidered in pearls, which peep in and out of the long cloaks that disguise their owners.

A pale blue domino comes next. The wearer is *petite*, at any rate, and she carries a large bouquet of forget-me-nots ; but, beyond that, there is nothing to be made out, for she disguises her voice and talks in broken English.

A figure in a scarlet satin domino, with the hood well drawn over her head, stands at least an inch or two taller than her fellows, and, from the height, the set of the head, and the shape of the handsome shoulders, the guests make certain it is their hostess. But its red folds conceal Lady Hermione ; and her sister, in black satin, her head muffled in black lace, passes almost unnoticed. This is as she wishes, and she rejoices in her disguise ; for she means it to be useful to her before the night is over.

Some of the men wear masks, a few are

in fancy dress, but there is no hard and fast rule—a fact which seems to give the whole thing twice as much go as if it were a more formal affair. Every one is a law unto him or her self; for once, English reserve and stiffness are banished; spirits rise; people who never talked nonsense before begin now; and ladies of the strictest virtue, under cover of the friendly mask, make violent love to men they hardly know. One or two, more daring still, make love to other people's property: it is allowable to poach behind a mask, and it is an excellent excuse for anything.

A masked quadrille opens the ball, and the girls who bend boldly over the railings, certain to escape the observation and black looks of their elders to-night, have never, in their lives, seen anything so perfect in its way as the group of masked men and women in Louis Quinze dress, who are the cynosure of all eyes.

The brocades and satins—the priceless lace—the waving fans—but, above all, the diamonds, that flash on powdered heads,

clasp slender necks, and gleam in stomacher and ruffle, are magnificent ; and the masked guests, as they crowd around, add to the picturesque effect.

“ Look, look, Vega ! There goes Aunt Julia !—No, that’s the Mums.”

“ No, Pussie, you’re wrong again. You can never make out anything or anyone. Bijou made the Mums wear her red domino to-night—lucky for the Mums, for she has got the best of the bargain for once. Don’t you see Aunt Julia now—coming into the room in Mums’ old black satin domino ? She’s whispering to Brian Beresford ; and he’s very much surprised and quite flabbergasted at what she’s saying to him. He hasn’t a notion who it is, for, somehow, one can’t imagine Aunt Julia in that shabby domino. Dear me ! what fun it must be to take people in like that ! and how I should love to be doing it ! I could tell people all sorts of funny things, that they think no one can possibly know ! I know a vast deal more than they think ; for when one is utterly out of it, one can watch and listen

If I had a mask and domino, I would go straight to Brian Beresford and make love to him, just as Aunt Julia is doing ; wouldn't you, Vega ? There is no one in the world like him. He is so out-and-out handsome, and such a darling ! I would follow him round the world, if he would only let me—if he would only take me with him the next time he goes off."

" You are not to talk such nonsense—you know how angry the Mums would be," says Pussie, mechanically.

She has so often said the same sentence, and it has never had the smallest effect on her younger sister.

" I daresay," says Dottie, indifferently, " the Mums likes to talk all the nonsense herself. She is a capital hand at it, when she's not trying to pinch and screw and get something out of somebody. But there's no one to hear me here but you and Vega ; and you two don't count, so, surely, I may talk as I like. Just look at them waltzing ! Oh, what wouldn't I give to be swinging round in Brian Beresford's arms, like that !

How I wish I was Aunt Julia at this moment. They seem so awfully happy! and they go flying along as if they had wings. I wonder if I will have as good a time as she has when I am her age. How splendidly they do dance together! and how handsome—how beautiful he is looking——!”

“ I wonder if you will ever stop talking, Dottie,” says Pussie, querulously. “ You make my head ache worse than ever. It was bad enough before I came down; and now the noise and the lights and your loud voice have made it twenty times worse. I can’t bear it any longer—I shall go to bed.”

Pussie’s pale, bloodless little face is drawn with neuralgia, and she departs forthwith. Dottie and Vega still keep their ground, and Dottie’s tongue never rests, or her eyes either. She makes out who is who, with a sharpness worthy of a better object. She spies flirtations, imagines assignations, accuses people who have no business to flirt of the most violent love-making, and through all her talk runs an undercurrent of anger that, young and eager as they both are, they

should be excluded from a scene in which their elders mean to permit no one to enter who could possibly interfere with their own pleasure. She inveighs against their selfishness, she vows that she will have her revenge some day, and at last, tired of talking and of looking at other people amusing themselves, she, too, goes off to bed.

Why does Vega linger? Is she not yet tired of looking down on the brilliant scene, and will the strains of dance music, no matter how divinely played, not pall on her in the end? The truth is, she hardly hears the music, she hardly looks at the dancing; her eyes seek out one face, and they follow one man as he dances, or talks, or whispers, or makes love, now to this mask, now to that.

She thinks of no one but Brian, and of the night when she, too, danced with him *à la belle étoile*. Then he seemed to be all hers, as they waltzed to the sound of noisy music under the waving boughs of the trees on Dartmouth Green. She feels she would give a dozen years of her life for such another dance, and a feeling bitterer even

than that felt by Dottie against those who keep her away from him fills her heart. Why should she be treated like an outcast—a pariah? What had she done to deserve it?

Now that Dottie has left her she feels lonelier than ever, for her companion's stream of talk, annoying as it was, had at least kept her from brooding; and even the exaggerated light in which Dottie had looked at everything had, by reason of its very absurdity, prevented her from taking things so hardly. She feels utterly forlorn now, her eyes are tired of watching, her heart is heavy. Brian is no longer dancing; she is worn out, and had better go to bed. She leans on the railings, forgetful that any roving glance from below may espy her, she feels so apart from everyone. Some tears come into her blue eyes, and fall unheeded on the garland of roses and marguerites that are twined along the balustrade.

Beresford at that moment enters the ball-room, and for a wonder he is alone. Something makes him look up, and though he hardly sees her drooping face, he knows by

every line of her slim body that it is his little love of last autumn who is standing there so sad and melancholy—the girl who Lady Julia assures him is in the seventh heaven of happiness, and who is on the eve of a rich and fortunate marriage. He has already asked for her, and the impression has been conveyed to his mind that in the absence of her future husband she has no wish to amuse herself. She may be pining for him at this minute for all he knows, and yet he does not believe that it is love for Mr. Mossop that makes her look so disconsolate now. For a few minutes he watches Vega—there is no doubt that she is alone and unhappy, even though he does not see her tears. He knows every inch of Conholt, he could find his way about it in the dark ; and he remembers a narrow staircase by which, without being seen, he can reach the gallery on which she stands. A minute more, and the two are there together face to face.

The tears are still on Vega's cheeks, but the eyes that meet his are no longer sad. A minute ago and they were drowned in tears ;

she was weeping, not loudly or noisily, but in a sad, hopeless kind of way. Now sorrow has no place in her heart; there seems no room for grief, for with the sudden revulsion of feeling, possible only in the very young, her heart leaps within her for joy when she sees who is standing beside her.

It was all a mistake! She was not forsaken or neglected! She is not an outcast any longer, for Brian Beresford has sought her and found her, and she asks nothing more from life!

They stand hand clasped in hand for a minute; a joyful minute that is worth a year of every-day existence. She has become suddenly, utterly happy, with a happiness that leaves no room for thought, for prudence, for calculation. Lady Julia may be a thousand miles away for all she knows or cares. Lady Hermione is as if she did not exist; and as for Mr. Mossop—poor Mr. Mossop!—well, it must be owned that his broad, uninteresting countenance does not in that supreme moment rise up between her and the goodly features of her love! It may

be wrong, it no doubt is so ; but for such a moment there have been some who would barter their soul's salvation.

“ My own little darling ! ” he begins—he offers no more formal greeting—“ I have found you at last ! ” and he triumphs exceedingly.

Lady Julia, Mr. Mossop, every consideration of prudence or worldly wisdom have been powerless to part him from Vega, and everything is once more the same as before. The clock seems to have been put back with a vengeance by them. Once more they are the same as when they wandered in the green lanes of Devonshire, or danced together on Dartmouth Green, or sailed over blue seas in the *Gitana*, the same as before they were parted.

“ They have told me all sorts of things about you,” he goes on, his happy eyes feeding hungrily on the exceeding fairness of his love, so that he hardly knows what he is saying ; “ but I never believed them.” (Oh ! Brian, Brian !) “ They were not true, were they ? ”

“ No ! no ! ” she says, as if in a dream ;

she does not know what he means ; what he is talking about ; her pulses are beating too fast and furiously for steady thought.

“ And why have they kept you up here ? Why are you not dancing downstairs like the rest ? ” They have drawn back from the flower-decked railing. Unconsciously they avoid the chance of unfriendly eyes from below roving in their direction. They lean against the wall hand in hand like a pair of children.

Vega laughs ; there has not been so much mirth in her laughter since she came to Conholt. She looks down at her worn black frock, its frayed edges, and its shining seams, and she shakes her pretty head.

“ Would you like to have seen me in the character of Cinderella ? I should have dearly loved to have had one dance—just one. It has been maddening to listen to the music up here, but it’s no use wishing for what one can’t get. I know it’s utterly impossible.”

He looks at her critically ; even to a man’s eye she is not fitly dressed to join the dancers. There is no doubt about it. He looks at her

from the top of her head, on which the golden hair is all ruffled and, as it were, blown about, down to the shabby little shoes that all but hide the beauty of her slender feet. He is glad to have the excuse of so looking, but when the survey is over, he is not able to assure her that as regards dress she may pass muster in the hall below.

“Can’t you put on something else?” he asks, “a white frock? anything would do. The ball isn’t half over. You have plenty of time to change. Do run upstairs, like a darling. Put on anything, and I will wait for you here.”

She laughs again, but not so mirthfully as before.

“And what would my reception from Lady Julia be if I took your advice? I don’t know. I can’t imagine; but of this I am quite certain, that I shouldn’t be down stairs long. Brian, you must be mad, or you must have forgotten Lady Julia even to dream of such a thing.”

“My poor little darling! my poor child! They don’t treat you well.” He looks down on the dancers, and then turns to her sud-

denly, with the air of one who is inspired, while his face is gay with smiles. "What have I been thinking about? This night of all nights it can be done. Yes; Vega! I promise you we shall have a dance together; such a dance as never was; down there, among them all; and Lady Julia herself shall not so much as know that you are there. I am an idiot not to have thought of it sooner. What are masks and dominoes for if not for concealment? Give me five minutes—two minutes; promise me not to leave this spot, and in that time I shall be back with them both; and then," joyously, "a fig for them all! You see a few of the people have taken off their disguise, and all the Louis Quinze people, at any rate, came in masks and dominoes. I shall have a dozen, at least, to choose from in the cloak room. The great Pinman was off guard there half an hour ago, and a pretty little housemaid is left in charge. It will be odd to me if I don't get the loan of a cloak and a mask from her."

It would be odd indeed! The female sex

do not as a rule long hold out against the fascinations of Brian Beresford ; he has pretty much his own way with them, and on this occasion, whether it is his *beaux yeux*, or his flattering words, or a small piece of gold that somehow finds its way into the hand of the pretty housemaid, or a combination of all these, it is certain that the five minutes he stipulated for are not over before he dashes upstairs with a black domino over his arm.

“ No, no, Vega ; you know nothing about dominoes ! I must dress you,” so he wraps her in the long cloak, which, excellent disguise as it is, has a certain grace about it, not to mention a delicious indescribable perfume, which marks it as the property of some coquettish dame. He ties the knots of pink ribbon under her chin, and down the whole front of her cloak, till he kneels at her feet like the lover that he is ; he fastens the friendly mask securely over her small face, the lace fortunately being long enough to hide the pretty mouth and everything but quite an insignificant bit of white chin ; then he draws the long hood right over her head till the

eyes are in shadow, and then his handiwork is complete.

“Stay, stay, one moment!” he says delightedly, and he breaks off a spray of the pink roses that are twined round the railing of the gallery, and fastens them close to the slender throat. In his eyes, in spite of all disguise, she still looks actually beautiful; but fortunately for her, the more indifferent would see nothing to distinguish her in any way from the other masks. He gives her no time to think, but opens a door that communicates with a wide corridor, and they pass through.

There are a good many people resting, flirting, idling, in the corridor, and Vega feels as if she must sink to the earth with fright. The colour rushes to her face; she blushes furiously behind her mask; her feet totter; the hand that rests on Brian’s arm trembles; she feels as if every eye was turned on her—her, the interloper, the uninvited guest! Her eyes seek the ground, and she hardly dares to raise them.

Some merry voices at last make her look

up. A blue domino, followed by two men, is talking and laughing with a gaiety and a zest which is rather French than English. They all seem in a hurry, and, full of life and spirits, are dashing down the corridor. They all but jostle Vega as they tear along ; but, to her surprise and joy, she sees that they do not give her a second look. They next pass a pair who do not appear to be particularly engrossed with each other, and who look at them in an indifferent sort of way, but they evidently see nothing remarkable in the closely-masked and hooded figure who walks beside Beresford, and Vega's heart gives one joyful thump—she realizes that she is safe.

A scarlet satin domino now comes towards them, and at sight of her Brian whispers to Vega, “Be sure not to speak—nothing can betray you but your voice ; or, if you are obliged to give an answer, talk in French.”

The red domino makes as if it would stop them, but Brian eludes the attempt, and the next moment he and his partner become

actors in the scene of which Vega had so lately been a disconsolate spectator.

The first deep, almost mournful, notes of the loveliest of waltzes fall on their ears, and Brian and Vega, as they dance together, hardly know if it is in heaven or on earth that "Thine for ever" is being played.

For her at least the joy of life has reached its climax ; her tide is at its flood, and never, no, never ! if she live to be a hundred—if all the glories of this world, and the love of man be laid at her feet, will she be nearer perfect happiness !

Their steps—their hearts—their every pulse beat in unison, while the spice of danger, the dread of discovery, give the one keen touch that is needed.

Not till the last notes are wailed out do they stop dancing. "It is over now," she whispers, in unsteady sort of tones ; "I must go away."

"Not if I die for it !" he answers, in a voice almost as broken as her own. "Do you see, they are going into supper now ? The next dance will be the best of the evening—

the hall will be half empty. That must be ours too. And then—ah! and then——”

There is a ring of sadness in both their voices.

“The pain that is all but a pleasure will turn
To the pleasure that’s all but pain.”

There is sadness in store for them both, and even in this supreme moment they know it; but come what may, they mean to be happy now!

They wander into the supper-room, where they find a secluded corner, and he brings her delightful things to eat and drink. The schoolroom tea was long enough ago for a young and healthy girl to feel hungry, and forced strawberries and iced champagne do not often come her way.

And now the “Venetian Boat Song” is played; the bandsmen sing the lovely words, and the sweet melancholy of the music seems to set their hearts and brains on fire afresh.

Vega at last knows happiness, for, clasped in Brian’s arms, she is in Paradise; and when

the dance ends, and the dreamy exquisite music ceases, she has ceased to fear, ceased to dread discovery. There seems to her but one human being in the world, and that is Brian Beresford.

They wander through some rooms where the dancers are "sitting out," some of them talking, and laughing, and flirting in a very pronounced manner, and others side by side in more dangerous silence; no doubt with Mephistopheles dangerously near some of these Fausts and Marguerites! But Brian and his companion do not linger to make observations, and neither do they notice their neighbours, nor do they draw any attention on themselves.

They wander through a wide-open French window into the small sheltered corner protected by two angles of the house, which has always been called Lady Julia's rose garden. It is raised a little above the rest of the terrace, from which it is divided by a low, carved stone balustrade, and marble statues gleam in that carefully-tended wilderness where roses are trained on wall and battle-

ment and around each pedestal, and the scent from a great Daphne bush is almost overpowering.

It is the hour for love, the hour when hot heads and hearts have before now been known to play sad tricks to their owners, and the surroundings are not ill-chosen.

“It is midnight, and moonlight, and music
Abroad on the odorous air.”

While in the sweet night

“Love throbs in the nightingales’ throats,
That warble what words cannot tell ;
Love beams from the beautiful moon ;
Love swims in the lanagerous glances
Of the dancers adown the dim dances,
And thrills in the tremulous notes
That rise into rapture, and swell
From viol, and flute, and bassoon.”

A carved bench in a dim corner holds the lovers, and if their whereabouts are discovered by unfriendly eyes, at least it is not their voices that bring people to spy on them.

But there are no more dangerous moments than when words fail, and when silence itself is eloquent. Every pulse in Vega’s body is beating wildly ; her whole being thrills with

the passionate ecstasy of first love—a love which is intensified in her case by the world's neglect and unkindness — neglect and unkindness which has half broken her heart.

As for Beresford, all power of speech seems to have left him also, and as regards conversation, can it be so called, to say in broken whispers, “My God! how I love you!”

But if they are dumb, “their very sighs are full of joy,” and the happy madness that possesses them needs no interpretation of mere words :

“The frequent sigh, the long embrace,
The lip that there would cling for ever.”

Ah! they are sweeter than the softest words, when the heart beats almost too violently—when the very breath comes in short, quick gasps, and when life is not counted by minutes but by emotions.

Something makes the girl look up, and she starts as she sees a tall figure in a scarlet domino who is standing alone at the open window looking at them.

She cannot tell how long that figure has stood there, or whether the eyes that pierce its mask have watched them for long. She does not know whether it is accident or design that has brought that watcher there, but there is something about the turn of her head that assures Vega that she has come to spy on them.

“Look, Brian, look!” she whispers, and involuntarily she moves from him, “I think that red domino is watching us. I don’t believe she has come here by accident. I am certain she knows us.”

The solitary figure is just out of earshot; but Brian, when he sees that it is Lady Hermione, knows that all is not well.

Her presence seems to cast a sudden blight on them both — there is something sinister about the aspect of that tall, silent figure, and as they in their turn watch her, something tells them that their brief hour of happiness is really over, and that payment has now to be exacted.

“We must go now,” says Vega, with a shiver, rising to her feet as she speaks.

Brian does not oppose her, but follows her into the house. He hopes to pass unchallenged, but if so, he has forgotten of what Lady Hermione is capable.

Lady Julia, devoured with curiosity about Brian, and the unknown mask to whom he has devoted himself, has commissioned Lady Hermione to find out what they are about, and Lady Hermione, who perfectly understands that it is expected of her to make herself useful to her sister in such underhand ways, and who, moreover, is not averse by nature to tortuous paths, has almost enjoyed the task. She has watched them dance, she had her eyes on them at supper, and though they escaped her for a time in the rose garden, she tracked them out in the end.

Though she was only there a minute before Vega felt her unwholesome influence, and looked up, she had seen enough to tell a woman of many lovers that these two, at least for the present moment, loved.

That is very evident, and all that is now needed is to find out who is hidden by that

black mask and domino. Gifted with a quickness that almost amounts to genius, Lady Hermione, nevertheless, is at sea this time.

She does not think of Vega any more than she thinks of her own suppressed and neglected children, and though she seems to know the pose of that head, even under the shelter of that satin hood, she cannot recall where she saw it.

She believes that this must be one of the numerous pretty married women with whom Brian Beresford had flirted hard at some time or other, and this belief leads her astray. In fact, she has already accused, in her own mind, a charming little lady, whom Brian all but married, of being his present companion, in spite of the fact that since her marriage two years ago the same lady has been "as chaste as ice, as pure as snow," and has up to the present moment entirely escaped "calumny."

When Brian and his companion try to pass her at the open window she stops them, as Beresford feared she would.

“My dear Brian,” she says, with a semblance of mirth in her tones, “I suppose you have been in the garden so long that you don’t know that all the masks and dominoes are off. It was settled that every one was to unmask after supper. Why, your partner will be quite remarkable—she will be the only mask in the ball-room! I am only waiting for some help to take this horrid thing of mine off. Help us both, Brian, or can I help you? I don’t quite know who you are, but we are certain to be friends. We are all friends in this house to-night.”

She stoops as she speaks, and makes as though she would untie one of the pink knots that fasten Vega’s domino from throat to feet; but the girl, in positive terror, wrenches her cloak from Lady Hermione’s grasp. The bow of ribbons remains in her ladyship’s hands.

“No, no! my lady,” says Brian, speaking in the lightest tone of which he is capable. “This is the fair Unknown! This is Cinderella, in fact, and we were only waiting about

in the garden for the fairy coach made out of the pumpkin to take her home. Come on, my fair Unknown! You have indeed been clever to have puzzled Lady Hermione herself."

"I suppose I may as well come also," says Lady Hermione, with a well-acted shiver. "It is cold in this room, and now that I have got rid of my heavy cloak, it is quite chilly. Don't be afraid," she adds laughing, "it is not my way to make a bad third. You shall say good-bye to me at the ball-room door, but you really *must* take off your disguise, my fair Anonyma! My sister, as Brian can tell you, is very imperious, and doesn't like to be thwarted. She commanded all her guests to unmask after supper; will you not accept my help?"

A warning look from Brian stops the words that are on Vega's lips, who, as her eyes meet Lady Hermione's penetrating glances, can hardly believe that she is really unknown.

"No, Lady Hermione," he answers for his companion, "we mean to be as clever as

you ; we are not going to let you find out our secret quite so easily."

There is a crowd in the next doorway through which they have to pass, for a dance has just ended. Lady Hermione is still close to them, but not close enough to hear Brian's whisper to Vega : "You must leave me, darling, there is no help for it. You know the house perfectly. Get to the Round Gallery somehow ; if possible, don't be seen. Leave your cloak and mask there, and I will see they are all right. It has to be done. We must part for your sake, child."

Quick as thought Vega leaves his arm, and so quick are her movements, and so deftly does she mingle with the crowd, and passing through them gains the winding staircase that leads to the gallery, that when Lady Hermione finds herself no longer blocked by Beresford, and her attention no longer distracted by his talk, there is not a sign of the mysterious black domino to be seen anywhere, and not a trace remains of her but the knot of pink ribbon that Lady Hermione holds crushed in her hand.

CHAPTER V.

“ The minstrels, and maskers, and mummers
Are gone like the leaves of lost summers.
The dancing dames and even
The last of the lingering lovers
Have flitted away ; and it seems
As tho’ that revel had only been
The brief fantastic pageant seen
By a sick man, whom some morphia cup
For fever-wasted lips fill’d up,
Hath mock’d with gorgeous dreams.”

“ AND this mysterious mask who stuck to Brian Beresford so determinately last night,” says Lady Julia to her sister the morning after the revels. “ I wonder that *you*, Hermione, who fancy yourself so clever, could have been so thoroughly checkmated by her. You say you tried to make out who she was, and she beat you. Why, a word overheard might have told you. No one can

ever really change their voices ; one can always remember afterwards who it was. I wish you had found out her name, I should like to have known who Brian had in tow. What were they about when you were near them ? ”

The two sisters are in Lady Julia's rose-garden, or rather Lady Julia is standing there in the brilliant sunshine, looking as superb as if she had not danced all night, and showing neither trace of fatigue nor want of sleep.

She can brave the light of day, and looks almost insolent in her blooming health. Lady Hermione is sitting at the window, knitting, as usual, as if for dear life, but not so engrossed in her work as not to be able to look up to watch the expression on Lady Julia's face.

“ You want to know what they were about, Julia ? If that marble dancing-girl over there could speak, she could tell you better than I can, for I expect they were here for a long time. When I found Brian and this mysterious Anonyma, they were sitting on that marble bench close to the statue, and

as far as I could judge, they were perfectly happy. If you wish to know exactly what they were about, he was kissing her hand, which, I must say, looked a very pretty one—kissing it a dozen times at least. The mask hid her blushes, I suppose, but any one could read passion in his face.”

In her own garden ! The locality seems to make it all the more bitter for Lady Julia to bear. Many a golden hour has she loitered away in that rose-garden with Brian Beresford, in the days when their love was new ; and they too have sat at the feet of that dancing-girl, when she believed he would have given the world, if he had it, for one loving glance of her own dark eyes, and one kiss of her perfect mouth.

“ Brian is too bad,” she says furiously, and the hot blood rushes to her cheek. “ He flirts with any one. As for you, Hermione, you’re no help at all. You can tell me nothing about this last love of his, except that she wore a black domino.”

“ I can tell you more than that, Julia,” says the other in angry tones. “ Look at

this," and she takes from her pocket a knot of pink ribbons. "I took this myself from the front of her cloak. It's not much, but all the same it's a clue that ought to lead to something. A detective would ask for nothing more."

"But we are not detectives," says Lady Julia, mockingly, "and we can't go round to all the people who were at the ball last night and ask them if they have lost a bit of pink ribbon."

"Certainly not," says Lady Hermione, "but we haven't a bad detective in the shape of Pinman. I would be ready to bet anything that she would be able to tell us who wore a black domino, trimmed with pink. Don't you see, Julia, what a peculiar shade this pink is ; just the thing to catch the eye of a lady's maid ?"

For all answer Lady Julia comes into the room out of the blazing sunshine, and rings for her maid.

"You do the cross-questioning, Hermione, please ; I hate that kind of thing ;" so Lady Hermione opens the fire.

“ I want to know, Pinman, if you can tell us who wore a black satin domino last night ; it had a little lace on the shoulders and round the neck, and was trimmed down the front with pink ribbons like this ? ”

She gives the knot of ribbons into the maid's hands, who turns and twists it about, and examines it as carefully as if she expected to find the owner's name woven into the satin. Pinman's thin face looks mysterious and important ; if she cannot answer Lady Hermione's question, she at any rate has something to say on the subject.

“ That black satin domino trimmed with the pink bows was in my hands last night, m'lady, or more correctly speaking, this morning, though who wore it is more than I can say. Your ladyship will be surprised to hear where I found it—thrown on the floor of the gallery, with a mask beside it. Mrs. Titmass had gone up with me there for a minute just to have a look at the dancing, and we all but tumbled over the domino lying all in a heap at the top of the small back stairs. It had been in the cloak-room early in the

evening, for I remember noticing the curious shade of pink; but when I took it back, which I did at once, m'lady, Jane knew nothing at all about it. She had never missed no domino; no one had been in the room since I left; and to hear her talk one would have thought it had walked there of itself. But that's how it is nowadays. None of the young girls who come to us as under servants are to be depended on for a moment. I never was one to trust them overmuch, but they gets worse and worse every day. I wouldn't believe Jane on her Bible oath, and I am sure from her eyes she knew all about that domino; but try as I would I could get nothing out of her—no, not a word. It was 'Miss Pinman' this, and 'Miss Pinman' that, but not a thing that one could make head or tail of."

"But how in the world did it get into the gallery? None of the visitors were up there."

"None of the visitors, perhaps, m'lady; but there are some who stays at Conholt who might more be called residents."

Pinman looks abject in her humility as she speaks ; but nevertheless she feels she has scored, and she hopes in time for the applause of the housekeeper's room when they hear her version of the conversation between herself and Lady Hermione. That lady, whose "mean ways" have long been a favourite grievance among the Conholt servants, and who has always had an unenviable notoriety among them for the smallness of her tips, does not answer Pinman at once, but Lady Julia laughs, so the maid knows that her insinuation has not displeased her mistress.

"How do you mean, Pinman?" asks Lady Julia, still laughing. "Surely you don't for a moment think that any of the young ladies would have the audacity to play us such a trick?"

"If you mean the Misses Langton, m'lady, I can answer for them myself. Miss Dottie passed me on the stairs before twelve o'clock, and she said that Miss Langton was bad with neuralgia, and had been in bed for half an hour. As for the other young lady," she

adds, pursing up her lips, "I can't answer for her ; I don't know."

Vega Fitzpatrick ! So she was the fair Unknown !—the rival of the great Lady Julia in the affections of Brian Beresford ! Of course it was ! Why had it not struck them before ?

The idea must somehow have been dormant in Lady Hermione's mind, for at Pinman's insinuation it burst into life at once. She cannot understand why she never thought of it before. A domino is a good disguise, and a great deal may be hid by a mask ; still, now that she realizes that it was Vega who wore them she remembers two or three trifles that ought to have given the clue to such a clever woman as herself.

As for Lady Julia, she—remembering the cruise of the *Gitana* last autumn, and Brian's ill-concealed feelings towards Vega—knows but too well who it was that was with him. The hot colour rushes to her face, her eyes flash, and the hands that make a pretence of re-arranging some roses in a vase, shake perceptibly ; but she was never deficient in

pride, and she does not mean to make a confidante even of the faithful Pinman. She commands her voice sufficiently to ask her an unimportant question about a dress, makes a show of listening to her maid's advice on the merits of jewelled embroidery *versus* point lace for a new tea gown, gives in to her on that important subject, and finally dismisses her without asking for any further information about the black domino. No sooner, however, has Pinman left the room than Lady Julia once more hurries to the bell.

"Julia, my dear Julia," says Lady Hermione, in warming tones, "what do you intend to do? What is to be the next move?"

"To send for this Fitzpatrick girl," says Lady Julia, firmly; and she does not look as if she would stand contradiction or opposition very meekly. "I wish to let her know what I think of her underhand behaviour and her deceitful ways before I am an hour older, and to tell her she can't play such tricks any longer at Conholt. I wash my hands of her

from this moment, and I shall take care she knows it too."

"And what good will you gain by showing your hand in this way?" asks Lady Hermione, dropping for once her knitting, and crossing to where Lady Julia is standing. Her manner to her sister is now almost caressing; she knows her hot temper, and that she will outwit herself if she is over-violent in her treatment of the young girl. She herself wishes evil to Vega even more actively than does Lady Julia, in spite of all the feelings of wounded love and pride that possess the latter; but she is far cleverer, and, at the same time, more astute than her sister, and she means to win a more complete victory.

"My dear Julia," she goes on, "be guided by me for once. If you make a martyr of that girl Reginald will be up in arms, and Brian will get wind of it. They will vow and declare that she meant no harm by anything she has done, and one of two things *must* happen—either the Colonel will insist on her staying on here for ever and a day, or

Brian, pauper as he is, will marry her. Choose now which of these misfortunes you wish to bring on your head. You say, neither. Naturally! Well; be guided by me, and we will get rid of that everlasting girl at once and for ever. For my part, I am sick of the very sound of her name, so I can well imagine what you must feel. Trust to me, and I will save you."

"You have always some deep-laid plan on hand, Hermione," says Lady Julia; "but I can't say it always comes off. What is the present one? and what is to be done this time? I will bet you anything you like that you will fail. Let me see. What shall I bet you? Shall we say fifty pounds or fifty pounds to one? That will suit both parties, won't it, Hermione?" and she laughs disagreeably in her sister's face.

"*Done!*" says Lady Hermione, laughing airily; but she means to win all the same. It is only fun—only a bet. Who would look on it as a sort of blood money? That fifty pounds, if she wins it, will come in very

handly, and will be a help to her in her housekeeping struggles when her visit to Conholt comes to an end at last; and what could be more virtuous than to do her best to make a little money for so good an object?"

"Well, then, Julia, this is my plan. All I ask is, that you should take me out driving with you this afternoon. All the visitors will have gone by that time, and I should like a drive with you immensely—and let us take Dottie with us. She is not very lightly built, but she can manage to sit in the small seat in the front of the victoria."

"And your plan, Hermione—where does it come in?" asks her sister in tones of surprise.

"That is my plan," answers Lady Hermione. "Now don't ask me another question, that is all I beg of you. Give me time and—wait. Above all, for goodness' sake, don't let Miss Fitzpatrick or anyone else find out that you know all she was up to last night. That would spoil everything. If you keep your own counsel you shall

win Brian back again, and I shall win my fifty pounds."

Lady Julia does not know what to make of her sister's request, but she is well aware that if she means to walk in crooked ways Lady Hermione is no bad guide, and her pride, if not her principle, makes her rejoice that there is some one else to do the dirty work that she foresees must be done if Vega is to be parted from Brian, or sent away from Conholt.

To succeed in those objects would make her give a ready consent to any plan that Lady Hermione might propose ; at the same time, she is glad to be spared all details as to how the girl's happiness is to be wrecked, and her fair name taken away.

She asks no more, but the Victoria is ordered as Lady Hermione has requested, Dottie is commanded to be ready to drive with them at four o'clock, and at that hour the two handsome sisters, who never look better than when they are together, take their places in the carriage, whilst Dottie, ill-dressed, unkempt, and both uncomfortable and

sulky, is wedged into the small seat in front of them. Lady Julia looks regal, haughty, and gloomy. Lady Hermione's large dark eyes are fixed on space ; she does not see the fine stretch of park, the herd of deer that are grouped under the big elms, the curtsy-ing retainer who throws wide open the lodge gates, nor does she take the slightest heed of the passers-by on the high road, who doff their hats, and stare as they pass. She is far too busy arranging words and sentences in her head, for she does not wish to say very much, but she intends all that she does say to be effective.

At last she breaks silence, and in tones that she apparently means for Lady Julia's ear alone, but which she takes care shall be loud enough for Dottie to hear also, she begins : " I should like very much to find out, Julia, who it was that Brian Beresford flirted with so shamefully last night. Try as I like, I can't think who it could have been. That was the only thing I couldn't get out of him—*her name*—he wouldn't tell me her name. Men always do draw the line there,

and he said that it was quite impossible for me ever to find out. He evidently believed I could never guess it, for he told me all sorts of queer things that she said to him." This becomes interesting, and Dottie, who above all things loves scandal and gossip, pricks up her ears. Her mother gives one swift look in her direction, and goes on. "Brian says she made violent love to him, till he really felt quite shy, and almost shocked. Fancy Brian strait-laced, ha! ha! ha! When I cross-questioned him, he said, 'You may take my word for it she was a pretty girl, or I couldn't have stood it. I like doing the love-making myself, as a rule, but she saved me all trouble.'"

"Did he tell you anything more about this mysterious mask?" asks Lady Julia, as her sister stops point blank. Lady Hermione does not mean to be alone in treachery; she must have an associate in the business that she has on hand.

"He told me that they danced together, and had supper together, and that he thought that was about enough, only his partner did

not think the same, but made him take her into the garden—your own rose-garden, Julia—and they seem to have sat there together half the night; he said if the dancing girl could speak it would be a bad business for them, for he would blush if their goings-on were known; his partner made love to him in the most bare-faced manner. He had never seen such a woman in his life. I wonder who on earth it was! He says I shall never find out, but I am certain of one thing—that it must have been a married woman. No girl could possibly have been so bold and forward.”

Dottie has by this time forgotten all prudence in her anxiety to hear what her mother is saying. She is leaning forward, and her bright beady eyes are fixed eagerly on the speaker. Anything about Brian Beresford is of the most thrilling interest to her, and besides, the story, as a story, is most exciting. The wicked masked lady, who had shocked Brian himself, and who had made such fierce love to him in the rose-garden, is a heroine after her own heart, and the whole

adventure is like a chapter out of one of the *Bow Bells Novelties* that Jane, the good-natured housemaid, is in the habit of lending her and Pussie. She is not reproved by either her mother or her aunt for listening, and now the latter asks another question.

“What was this partner of Brian’s like? How was she dressed?”

“She was certainly tall, and I should say slim; I noticed, too, that she had a very white skin. That is all I can tell you about her looks, for I saw nothing of her but her hands and arms, and a bit of chin. Her domino was black satin, trimmed with a little black lace on the shoulders, and tied with pink satin bows down the front—rather a peculiar shade of pink, by the way. Look! I can show you one of these bows. One of them came off by accident, and I chanced to pick it up,” and Lady Hermione produces from her pocket the pink knot that she had taken from Vega’s cloak the night before.

Lady Julia takes it out of her hand for a moment, looks at it with a kind of disgust

and then flings it back on her sister's lap. Lady Hermione, as if not to be outdone in indifference, flings it across to Dottie.

"There, Dottie, it may trim a pincushion or something or other—it's of no use to me."

Dottie, in her turn, puts it in her pocket, for she is fond of the importance of being in the possession of a good story, and she feels it will be a telling point to be able to produce the bow at the right moment, as she repeats the tale she has just heard to her companions.

Lady Hermione seems to have nothing more to say on the subject of Brian and the mysterious lady who, under cover of mask and domino, had shocked him by her boldness of speech and manners. As for Lady Julia, she hardly speaks a word the remainder of her drive, and her thoughts cannot have been very pleasant ones, if her frowning brow and lowering expression are any index to her inward feelings!

To her credit be it said that not only does she feel Brian's defection most bitterly, but that, unscrupulous as she is in some ways,

she is angry with herself, with her sister, and with the world in general. The underhand and treacherous game that she is engaged in revolts her. "A fair field and no favour" has always more or less been her motto, and though she does not mean to stay her hand, it is not to her mind to stab her rival in the dark.

She follows suit to Lady Hermione, but positively hates her sister for giving her such a lead, and she cannot bear to look her in the face. Naturally, neither of them trouble to make conversation to Dottie, so they drive in total silence; and when they reach home once more, Lady Julia, as she sweeps up the gallery, announces that she means to rest undisturbed in her boudoir till dinner-time. Lady Hermione hurries after her.

"We have been successful so far, Julia, have we not? Look at Dottie, there, tearing upstairs. In five minutes she will have told her tale in the proper quarter, and the result of our little talk will be—happiness for Mr. Mossop! When you ask Vega to-morrow morning what message she means

to send him, I don't think there is much doubt what her answer must be. You ought to be grateful to me for helping you to get rid of your burden, my dear."

Lady Julia's gratitude is expressed by something very nearly approaching a scowl; and not a word does her sister get out of her before they part company.

In the meantime Dottie has, as her mother said, torn upstairs, and now she drops like a bomb-shell into the quiet schoolroom. Its occupants are very peaceful, for Pussie is sitting at the table, bent nearly double over a bound-up volume of the *Family Herald*, owned by Jane, the pretty housemaid, and lent by her to the schoolroom party.

Vega, on the other hand, is doing absolutely nothing; for gazing out of the open window can hardly be called an occupation. The view that the schoolroom window commands is a pretty one; but she does not look at the waving boughs of oak and elm, or at the wide extent of rather flat park, or even at the long purple shadows that flicker across the grass ride. The sky is black with the

rooks who are coming home from their afternoon marauding, and they at least are not silent ; but she does not hear the confused cawing. Her eyes are with her heart, “and that is far away.”

It is Brian's beloved face that she sees in that day-dream, and the words that he said to her last night have rung in her head ever since. She knows them by heart, and as she repeats them softly to herself they sound like music in her ears. Her lips are parted in a dreamy smile, and surely her cheeks have borrowed some of the lovely sunset tints that deck the sky, and surely her eyes have caught some of its heavenly shining. She is brought out of Paradise by Dottie—Dottie, who is standing at her elbow, looking the incarnation of life and eagerness, her eyes full of jovial devilry, and her whole person swelling with importance, as she anticipates the interest with which Vega will listen to her story.

“ Well, Dottie, you look very lively ; have you had a nice drive ? ” asks Vega, as she turns on her lovely eyes full of the light

that was never yet on sea or land. She has been awakened from her day-dream, and she has now to drop down to Dottie's prosaic level, and to listen to the wonderful tales that she sees are to be poured into her ear.

"Drive!" repeats Dottie, contemptuously. "Oh! that was neither here nor there. As usual, neither of them ever opened their mouths to me, and as for Lady J——, she looked as black as a thunderbolt the whole time. It wasn't better or worse than any other drive; and that is all that can be said about it. But"—and here Dottie looks very cunning—"I overheard the Mums telling Aunt Julia *such* a story—twice as exciting as anything Pussie could find in her *Family Herald* there—twice! a hundred times more exciting, because we know the hero, and there never was a hero in the *Family Herald* or *Bow Bells* either to come up to Brian Beresford!"

"Brian Beresford!" Vega repeats the name in a mechanical, stupid sort of way; but she has no time to collect her scattered thoughts before Dottie is off again.

“As a rule, when the Mums tells Aunt Julia any secrets, she whispers them right into her ear ; but by good luck to-day I could catch every word. She talked low, of course ; but I could make it all out.”

“Make what out ? Do get on with your story, Dottie,” says her sister, in a querulous tone of voice, eager to return to the loves and adventures of Sir Herbert Vavasour, and the being of unearthly beauty whom he adored, and feeling quite certain that Dottie has no story to tell half so thrilling as theirs.

Dottie, however, has no intention of being hurried, but turning her back in disdain on Pussie, she addresses herself exclusively to Vega.

“Just fancy, Vega ; there was a mysterious mask at the ball last night, and no one can find out who it was. Brian never left her side, but though the Mums did her best, she couldn’t find out who it was, and try as she liked she couldn’t get her name out of Brian.” Vega breathes more freely and the colour that had left her face comes back to it again. “That was quite right ; men, nice men, I

mean, never *will* tell people's names," says Dottie, sagaciously; "but he told her a pretty lot all the same. He says no one ever made such fierce love to him before. His exact words were, 'As a rule I like to do all the love-making myself, but she saved me all the trouble.' He told the Mums that it was utterly impossible that she could ever find out who this mysterious lady was; but he said he didn't mind telling her that he had had a little too much of her. He had danced with her, and taken her into supper, and then he thought he would have got rid of her; but no, she stuck to him, and made him take her into Aunt Julia's rose-garden, where they sat for hours. If she hadn't been so pretty he couldn't have stood it. As it was, he says he is glad that the marble dancing girl can't speak, for that the way this girl went on shocked even him. I would give anything to know who it was, but if the Mums was beat, no one would ever find out. She says this friend of Brian's had on a black satin domino, trimmed with a little lace, and tied all down the front with pink ribbons. The

Mums somehow got hold of one of these pink bows ; and here it is !” As a climax, Dottie draws the ribbon from her pocket, and flings it down before Vega on the window-sill.

Her tale is told, and now she looks for her reward. She expects applause, approbation, and above all wonder and surprise ; she means to discuss the principal points, and to thresh out the whole story, doing her best, with the help of her companions, to fix the identity of Brian Beresford’s partner on some one, *any one*.

Instead of all this the whole thing falls flat ; she might have told them the most uninteresting bit of news possible, for all the interest that is taken in it. There is silence, total silence, when Dottie stops speaking. The hoped-for reward is long of coming, if it comes at all. All in vain has she kept her ears open ; remembered with a memory naturally retentive for scandal every word uttered by her mother, bottled it up for the benefit of those left at home, and hurried back to let them have the news as quickly as

possible. She feels much disappointed, and at the same time surprised, at their want of interest; she casts a backward glance at Pussie—Pussie who has not missed a word, but who takes a petty revenge by pretending to be too much immersed in that fine serial romance “The Doom of the Fated” to be able to attend to more sublunary matters.

The story has missed fire as far as her sister is concerned; but now for Vega.

The colour this time seems to have left her sweet cheeks, as if it would never more return; her small face looks pinched and drawn, and has a curious greyish pallor that a wiser person than Dottie might be frightened to see. Her eyes are turned away, so that Dottie cannot read their expression, but every line of the drooping figure tells its own story. No fear this time that Dottie’s information has been heard by unheeding ears; it seems, indeed, to have given a death-blow to her listener.

Dottie has a hard little heart. Were Vega lovely and beloved, or triumphant, or successful, or merely fortunate, she would grudge

her every joy as it came ; she would be filled with hatred, and malice, and all other evil passions, for in her small way she is at war with society, and ready and eager to throw stones, or bespatter with mud, any one who is more of a favourite of Fortune than herself.

She is not her mother's child for nothing, and a violent temper and vindictive feelings are hers by inheritance ; but the defunct Mr. Langton must have been cast in a weaker mould, for there is a saving grace about Dottie which does not come to her from the maternal side. She has it in her to be a good hater, but she also has it in her to be a little sorry for those who are down, and though she would never be able to "rejoice with those who do rejoice," she might weep with those who weep.

Perhaps even in better hands, and with a better training, Dottie with her natural love of fighting, and of being in the opposition, might have bloomed into a champion of the oppressed ; as it is, those who are weak, or poor, or miserable, or who have a still worse time than herself, may count on her as a firm

ally, only to be turned into a foe should good luck fall to their lot.

Vega, with her beauty dimmed, her looks marred, her whole being crushed as if from some physical blow, appeals to all that is good in her; her first impulse is to screen her from Pussie's cold eyes that may at any moment be lifted from her book, and to prevent her sister's cold calculating little head from working out any theory about Vega's woe-begone appearance, or drawing any conclusion that might be hurtful to her.

She looks at Vega herself curiously but not unkindly. A duller person than Dottie Langton could see that this is no common grief, and indeed in losing Brian Beresford Vega has lost her all.

Brian's treachery means that she is friendless and alone, without a soul to stand by her, without a friendly hand to help her at the most critical moment of her life.

Alone!—utterly alone! Worse than alone, for she is among those who scorn and despise her, and who have but one idea, and that is to get rid of her.

While she believed that Brian loved her there was always hope, and she felt consoled even in her worst troubles ; now her love for him has turned to ashes in her mouth.

In her innocence she believes that she must indeed have been a burden to him last night ; that he had tried but could not shake her off, and that she had let him see her love too clearly. Why not ? If he had never loved her, and if he had only amused himself in flirting with her as with many another. She remembers now his coldness to her on the day of the pic-nic, and she feels as if her heart would break when she hears that he has laughed at her love, and held her up to ridicule to her arch enemy Lady Hermione.

The silence is oppressive, for she seems struck dumb. Something chokes her when she tries to get out a few words ; but her eyes look like those of a hunted animal as she turns them on Dottie. She, too, generally so voluble, does not speak. If she has not quite the key of the enigma she is pretty near the truth, and though she would dearly

like to ask some searching questions, she dare not. There is a dignity about Vega in all her grief that makes the other feel constrained to hold her peace.

She spares her all sympathy or caresses or even any indication that she knows her secret ; but as Dottie bundles the pink knot of ribbons once more into her pocket her eyes tell the other that she is sorry for her, and that look comforts just a little the friendless girl.

CHAPTER VI.

“ When the sands on the sea-shore nourish
 Red clover and yellow corn ;
When figs on the thistle flourish
 And grapes grow thick on the thorn ;
When the dead branch, blighted and blasted,
 Puts forth green leaves in the spring,
Then the dream that life has outlasted
 Dead comfort to life may bring.”

THE world is eighteen months older than when there was music, and masking, and mummers at Conholt Park, and when the shallow plots were hatched there that seemed of so little importance from one point of view, but which succeeded in wrecking a girl's happiness as thoroughly as more deep-laid plans would have done.

The people who worked so hard to attain their object have half forgotten their share

in the business. A lie or two more or less sits lightly on some consciences, and those who in their day have changed lovers half a dozen times, and who have loved many men a little, do not credit others with constancy to one alone.

Lady Julia, in whose character is ingrained a certain love of fair play even towards those who cross her path or jostle her in the broad road that leads to destruction, never makes the most distant allusion to her domino ball, far less to her sister's machinations at that time, which succeeded only too well. Lady Hermione had played into her hand then, partly because she was resolved at all cost to keep her footing at Conholt, and had long realized that poor relations are expected to do all the dirty work that may turn up, and partly because her own dislike to Vega Fitzpatrick was so violent and unreasonable that to get her out of the house she was even ready to help her to a rich marriage. Her ladyship had long ago given up all hope of Mr. Mossop as a possible husband for Dottie; she was clever

enough to know when she was beaten, and though she grudged him and his money to the girl she so heartily disliked, she felt it was necessary to make some sacrifice in order to get Vega ousted from Conholt Park.

She may have had another and meaner motive too! From the days when Judas sold his Master, men, and women also, have been found to betray friend as well as foe for pieces of silver; and when Lady Julia handed her sister a cheque for fifty pounds the day after Vega's engagement to Mr. Mossop was publicly announced, it was the price of blood undoubtedly, though Lady Hermione did not look at it in that light, or as anything but hard cash, which, judiciously laid out by her, would keep the wolves at bay and would give her a little peace from clamouring creditors. Perhaps there are extenuating circumstances even for Lady Hermione. It needs a fine character to stand the test of adversity, the wear and tear of poverty, and the depression produced by never-ending bad luck; and Lady Hermione, strong and headstrong as she was, had

grown bad in the process. She had long been one of the arabs of society, and her hand had been against every man to the extent of doing her best to get as much as possible out of them all. She had once upon a time tried to win their love, that she might pick their pockets the easier ; now her aim and object was their money alone ! She looked on that fifty pound cheque as payment for value received, and she thought her sister had got off cheaply when she paid her that sum to have a hated obstacle removed from her path. She had but one pang of genuine remorse, and that was that the figures written on that cheque were not for double the amount. However, fifty pounds was better than nothing, and the whole business gave her a greater hold over her sister than ever.

Vega Fitzpatrick now troubles them no more, and if Brian's allegiance to Lady Julia is but a half-hearted one nowadays, at least she is spared the misery of seeing him devoted to another, for Brian's mind has been poisoned too.

It had not been difficult to persuade him, when he heard that Mr. Mossop was going to marry Vega, that the girl was as mercenary as—well!—as most of the other girls he was in the habit of meeting in society. He did not credit it all at once—he did not quite take Lady Julia's word for it—he did not believe it because he saw it in print, but it was impossible for him to doubt Colonel Damer, and all the more when he saw that the marriage was unpleasing, if not displeasing, to him.

“It wasn't my doing, Brian,” the Colonel had said when it was first talked about between them. “I have no fault to find with Mossop as far as his character goes, though he is not half good enough for that lovely girl, and utterly unsuited to her in every way ; but she has never had a chance, and I daresay you know enough about her ladyship to know that she would never be likely to have one here. The fact is, that a good-looking woman like Julia, who lives for society and amusements of all kinds, won't be bothered with taking a girl about with

her. She wouldn't do it for her own sister's children, and she told me uncommonly plainly that she wouldn't put herself out for Vega Fitzpatrick, and in fact that she strongly objected to her staying any longer at Conholt. Well! what was to be done with her? Bar ourselves, she hasn't a friend in the world. Hautaine, to be sure, is her uncle, but I should like to see him helping any one but himself, and if anything so quixotic or far fetched ever entered his head, his wife would speedily nip it in the bud. Now Mossop comes along, he is desperately in love with Vega, and wants to marry her. I don't know that he will make her particularly happy, but I am certain he will be very good to her. She, on her side, is quite agreeable; indeed, strange as it may appear, they tell me she is very much in love with him. What would you have me do? Forbid the bans because I think him bumptious, and underbred, and a bit of a cad? That would be absurd. In the first place, my opinion was never asked till it was all settled, and secondly, and lastly, if

she is contented, what more does any one want ?

“ What, indeed ! ” repeats Beresford drearily, and something in the tone of his voice strikes the kind-hearted Colonel.

“ I expect we both feel much the same about it, Brian,” he adds ; “ but there is nothing to be done. It was decreed the poor child was not to stay here ; she can’t beg her bread ; she is between the devil and the deep sea with a vengeance, and I suppose it is a blessing that this rich fellow has taken a fancy to her. I wish it had been you, Brian ; but I suppose you can’t keep yourself, far less a wife.”

Brian makes no answer, but he thinks bitterly that the girl who kissed him in the rose-garden is worthless, like the rest.

And Vega—what of her ? What have the last eighteen months been to her, and how has she fared ? She is alive, and that is something ; nay, more, she is fairly well and strong ! She eats, she sleeps, she smiles when she is merry, she laughs when there is anything to laugh at ; her sweet face is

not wan and drawn, and sorrow has not marred her outwardly. Her soul has been wrung with grief; indeed, there have been times at the very beginning when it seemed almost more than she could bear. But we get accustomed to, and as it were friendly with, our sorrow in the end, though Vega has never lost the feeling of being utterly friendless and alone in the world that she felt for the first time in its full force when she heard that Brian Beresford had made a mockery of her love, and had despised her for it, and wearied of her.

Before then she had been lonely and forlorn enough in all conscience, and for that very reason had clung all the more to Brian; now there is no one!—nobody!

Nevertheless even sorrow is not eternal, even her grief has been deadened by time. It is there, it is ready to sting her on occasion, but she could hardly have gone on living at all were it as keen as in the first dreadful days when she found herself forsaken.

She has been Mrs. Mossop of The

Towers for more than a year, and perhaps at the end of that time it is the weariness of life that oppresses her more than its sadness.

Mr. Mossop, as Colonel Damer had prophesied, is kind—intensely, laboriously kind. He was as much in love with Vega when he asked her to marry him as a man of his temperament could be, and his love has not grown colder by the wear and tear of twelve months ; but he is undemonstrative, and dull, and elderly ; the weight of forty-eight years has sobered him, and there is no doubt that he and Vega from the first have nothing in common.

How could they have ? On one side is a creature who is all life, and excitability, and feeling, above all, who is in the first flush of youth, and whose young blood runs warmly in her veins, and on the other is an elderly, plodding, eminently respectable man of business, a cad, perhaps, though certainly more of a cad in outside show than in heart and feeling, but still a man whose speech, and ways, and manners, must

grate every moment of the day on any one with refinement and perception.

He is worthy, that is to say, he bears the highest character in commercial circles ; he is kind to the poor, though he is fonder of figuring on a subscription list headed by a duke, and quoted in the county paper, than of giving a tenth part of that sum in a more unostentatious fashion ; but he has a kind heart for all that, and not a bad proof of it is, that he is liked, if laughed at, by all who are in his pay, and that the dictum of the servants' hall and grooms' room is, that "there may be finer gentlemen, but there's many a worse man than old Mossop !"

His kindness to Vega is overpowering, and deprives her of any cause for complaint, even were she of those who find comfort in lamentations ; she is surrounded by every comfort, every luxury ; she has for the first time in her life an assured position, no longer living as it were on sufferance, and on the charity of those who refuse to acknowledge she had the slightest claim on them—no longer kept in the background—the victim

of Lady Julia's bad temper—the companion of the hopeless, spiritless Pussy, and the touchy, violent, coarse-mannered Dottie, or the target at which Lady Hermione aims her poisoned arrows.

Her life now is indeed a contrast to the old Dieppe days, when, pinched with poverty, and oppressed by the dark shadow that hung over herself and her father, she was the sole companion of a man who had made shipwreck of his life, and who, when he foundered, had dragged his nearest and dearest to the depths with him.

As well compare the shabby lodging in the Rue de la Barre, which was all she then knew of home, with the gilded splendours of her new abode, or the Vega who, in faded frock and sun-burnt hat, wandered in the fields of Normandy, or under the black shadows of the firs in the Forest of Arques, or trod the mossy paths in the wood of Tibermont—alone—always alone—uncared for—neglected—with the mistress of The Towers, whose every wish is anticipated, every duty performed by proxy, every pleasure ar-

ranged, and every want supplied before it is even felt.

Who would not be glad and rejoice over such a change for the better? Yet it is certain that in spite of the hardships and sorrows of the old days, Vega never knew the meaning of "utter stagnation" till she lived in luxury and ease at The Towers.

Oh! the long, meaningless daylight hours! Oh! the stupid never-ending evenings! the wearisome *tête-à-têtes* with Mr. Mossop, the amusements that did not amuse—the pompous dinner parties, the preparation for which was such a business for her husband, and such a burden for Vega, entailing as they did such long and exhaustive conversations with chef, and head gardener, and butler, and so much reference to the *Peerage*, *Burke's Landed Gentry*, and every book that could by any chance throw more light on the subject of precedence!

Mr. Mossop's dinners are celebrated, and no one who is fond of eating ever refuses one of his invitations on any account. They are veritable banquets, and attract by their own

merits alone. But Vega, as she sits at the head of the flower-decked board, which glitters with gold and silver, often intercepts a glance of amusement, or contempt, or even scorn, as some glaring instance of ostentation or vulgarity is noticed by a keen-eyed guest.

Mr. Mossop's anxiety and fussiness before these feasts of Lucullus come off—the pompous manner in which he receives his guests in the “Versells Gallery”—even his habit of standing in the same position, and on the same spot to greet them—his unexpressed wish that Vega should always fill, as well as she is able, the huge throne-like Louis the Fourteenth gilded chair near the fireplace; the length of the bill of fare, the number of the courses, the duration of the banquet, the flushed faces of the guests as they eat and drink more than is good for them—the dreary evenings when figures that seem hardly in keeping with their gorgeous surroundings sit stupid and inert on the pink satin, hand-embroidered chairs that form part of the Trianon suite—all these in their turn tell on

Vega's nerves, and make her now and then long for the freedom and want of restraint, even if accompanied by the poor fare, of the Conholt schoolroom. It is all so formal, so monotonous, and when evenings such as these come to an end at last, when Mr. Mossop has conducted the last remaining dowager to her carriage, and when returning to Vega, who looks such a slim, childish, little *châtelaine* among them all, he repeats his favourite sentence, "I think we've been quite up to the mark this time," in a tone of intense satisfaction, and self-congratulation, she wonders if life has nothing better than this in store for her, and if in the unequal game of Fortune it will never be her turn.

Days pass—weeks are lived through—months drag out their weary length—and they all resemble each other like drops of water.

There are no worries, no annoyances, no dark days to be endured—money troubles are a part of the remote—the Dieppe past—all is plain sailing, but it is the very triumph of stagnation and dulness.

The same things seem to be done mechanically every day, and always at exactly the same hour.

The Court Circular itself does not chronicle a more wearisome round of so-called amusements than would be a record of the life lived at The Towers.

It would take some one more determined than Vega to stem the strong current of precedent and regularity that ebbs and flows there. How can she alter the excellent arrangements of the house? How can she be spontaneous and free where all has been for so long moulded on the very highest and most correct models. How can she even be interested in a house which has no need of the eye of a mistress; for have not Messrs. Dado and Frieze attended to the minutest details of comfort as well as magnificence? There are the best drilled servants that money can command, and a great many of them who know their business far better than she could teach them, even if she felt inclined for the task.

How can she interfere with housekeeping

when The Towers boasts the best cook in Blankshire? She cannot "gild refined gold, or paint the lily."

She wanders about the conservatories, but there is not even a dead leaf left for her to pick off there, while Mr. McIlwraith, the head gardener, looks hurt if she picks what he looks on as his own flowers, and condescending and superior if she ventures to make a remark about them at all!

The grounds of The Towers are not extensive, and certainly the reverse of interesting. There are a great many ornamental wire fences, and a good many stucco fountains and figures. The trees in the shrubberies have been newly planted, and are but a foot or two high, while the flowers in the garden-borders are all bedded out and arranged in the severest geometrical patterns: standard rose-trees stand in straight lines, like so many sentinels, and the dahlias and hollyhocks look almost painfully precise.

The gravel paths are the brightest shade of red, and on their smooth, uncompromising surface a weed would have been an impossi-

bility—though almost a relief. All is new and gaudy and glaring. No one could pace for ever up and down those gravelled walks, kept with such minute care—paths which lead to nowhere, and where every eye can see those who zig-zag along their unmeaning turns and curves.

Mr. Mossop can walk about “the shrubberies” for hours. He loves the game of country gentleman, which is such a new one to him. He loves interviewing the retainers—inspecting the stables—paying personal attention to every evergreen and shrub and stick and stone about the place.

Fortunately, for his peace of mind, there are, at least, six months in the year when he is not obliged, by any unwritten law, to mount a horse, and he takes the full benefit of that act of grace, though he is never seen out of breeches and gaiters; and, with riding-whip in hand, does his best to look the character of the hunting-man who longs for November!

He considers The Towers as his own especial handiwork—the child of his brain.

He is never so happy as when he fondly imagines he is looking after things there ; and he believes that his wife must be equally so.

Besides, if she wants change, is there not the waggonette, or her own victoria ? and can she not drive into Grimthorpe to shop ? or go over to see those whom he proudly calls "my wife's people" at Conholt Park ? or call on any of the other county magnates who are within driving distance ?

What more can any girl want ? Kind-hearted as he is, he cannot help remembering the very different position that was hers before he raised her to her present high estate.

Like many men of his age, the material comforts of life seem the one thing needful in his eyes ; and the idea could never enter his head that a girl could possibly wish for more than a fine house, magnificently-furnished rooms, smart clothes, and a most tasteful selection of modern jewellery.

He does not forget the unhappy home he took her from, or the tarnished name that

was hers by inheritance. His practical mind realizes clearly how much she has bettered herself, even though he feels proud and happy that it should be so ; and, incapable as he is of grudging her anything he can give her, still, in his heart of hearts, he keeps a sort of debtor and creditor account with her.

He could not understand her feelings were she to speak them aloud, or proclaim them from the battlemented roof of The Towers. Sorrow ! grief ! For what ? For long leaden hours, dull days, and a monotony that is often harder to bear than actual misfortune.

“ Why ! surely all women worthy the name of women like to stay a good deal at home. Most of them spend long hours in the house, and never do anything much, as far as I have ever seen. Some of them certainly play a little on the piano—you are obliged to listen to them in the evenings after dinner ; but their music, when all is said and done, is not half so cheery and lively as the orchestrion. Others copy

water-colour drawings which, at their best, never look so well on the walls as chromos ; and the rest of their work is about the same value. Let Vega play or paint, if she feel inclined ; or, if her line is reading, does not The Towers' library boast many thousands of books—all bound in the finest morocco, and put in when the house was furnished ? Thank goodness ! no one need be dull in such a well-appointed house as The Towers. And then, out of doors—well ! if Vega wishes to be one of the sporting-ladies, why ! there's my sister Charley who will look after her and put her up to everything."

Such are Mr. Mossop's unspoken thoughts, so far as his wife is concerned. The mere fact that he has married her has not changed his nature, or opened his eyes, or given him the power of understanding her ; and he takes poor Vega's efforts to please him, her sweet submission to all his plans, and her utter silence about her sad past, as so many proofs that she is happy.

Happy ! without a friend in the world ! a child meant to be petted and caressed—a

girl formed for love and adoration ! Happy ! while she lives a stagnant, humdrum life—a stranger, in reality, to her husband and all who surround her ! Happy ! when she has lost Brian ! when Brian has deceived her and played her false — Brian, with whom she would gladly have shared a crust, and with whom she could have begged that very crust, and yet been in bliss—Brian, who, she supposes, she will never see again !

No, no ! she is grateful ; she realizes all she owes to Mr. Mossop—she hopes never to disappoint him in any way, she means never to fail him ; but happiness is a plant of another growth, and cannot be forced, as Mr. McIlwraith forces rare flowers in the houses that he looks on as his particular property.

Perhaps a stronger and more determined disposition—a mind cast in a more vigorous mould, could have adapted itself easier to its surroundings, and could have shut up and locked the book in whose pages the past has been written. Some there are as strong and far-seeing, who are lucky enough to be

able to extract the greatest happiness from their lot, let that lot be what it may, and who can take life half indifferently, half philosophically.

Vega is not one of them. To her Mr. Mossop may be kindness personified ; but his ways, his manners, his every thought, will for ever jar on her.

The Towers is almost palatial in its grandeur. It will always be to her a house devoid of any sentiment of home ; and, to the end of her days, she will always feel half a stranger, as she sits in the "Versailles Gallery," or wanders about the richly gilded, highly decorated, but stiff and formal, rooms where Messrs. Dado and Frieze were given so much latitude, and where they so signally triumphed !

There is a little corner in the conservatory, under a tall palm, where a plain little rustic table and chair have been allowed to remain ; and here Mrs. Mossop feels more at home than anywhere else in her fine house.

Here she sits by the hour together, and

here she weaves her own poor little romances.

Here she has dreamt of Brian — reproached Brian—made excuses for him to herself. He has been her imaginary companion for hours at a time ; and the unread novel has lain on her lap, and its leaves have never been turned over at all ; while she, languid and passive in the warm, damp, somewhat oppressive atmosphere, has lived over and over, and yet over again, the few happy hours that were hers before she found out what his love was worth.

“ I never saw any one like you, Vega,” says her sister-in-law to her from time to time. “ I should die if I did nothing all day long. In pure self-defence I wonder you don’t take up something. Why don’t you come out hunting ? You’d get along as well as anybody else after a time or two. Albert would give you a hunter right enough.”

“ You’re talking great nonsense, Charley,” Mr. Mossop is in the habit of remarking on such occasions, for it is not the least annoying peculiarity of the good man that he

repeats himself a good deal, and always in exactly the same words, "You don't for a moment imagine that Vega, fragile as she is, could stand what you do? Why! one of your long hunting days would kill her outright. It's all very well for you and Lady Gornaway" (here Mr. Mossop swells with pleasure as he brackets his sister with a sporting countess), "but it wouldn't suit Vega at all. She isn't one of your athletic modern women; and I am very glad she isn't. No offence to you, Charley; you're all very well in your way, but I would rather keep Vega as she is."

"If you mean that she would get a good deal more colour into her cheeks, and become a trifle weather-beaten in the process, perhaps not be quite so good-looking as she is now if she took to hunting, I daresay you are right," says Miss Mossop, with a loud, jovial laugh; "but if you think it's better for Vega to be mewed up all day long in the house, crouching over the fire, or stewing in that hot, stuffy conservatory, well! all I can say is, I don't agree with you. I am stronger

than Vega, but it would be the death of me to lead the life she does. I couldn't stand it."

Miss Mossop, though by no means in her first youth, is a good many years younger than her brother, with whom she has always been the best of friends; indeed, before he married Miss Fitzpatrick, his sister had been the nominal head of his house, as far as sitting at the head of his table and receiving his guests constitutes a hostess.

She is a tall, strong, jolly-looking woman, possessed of but one idea—a mania for sport in all its branches, and for fox-hunting in particular. She is a good fellow all round—free-spoken and popular, and incapable of anything mean or petty. She does not for a moment grudge her brother his pretty wife, or Vega her position as mistress of The Towers, which, it must be owned, she had enjoyed thoroughly before she was dispossessed of it.

But she cannot help a certain feeling of contempt for any one who is so indifferent to what is to her the business of life, and she would give a good deal to see the girl

who has taken her place something of a sportswoman! That "Mrs. Albert," as she generally calls her sister-in-law, should be a muff from her point of view fills her with real sorrow! She has had to make excuses enough for her brother, both to herself and others, though she has always consoled herself with the reflection that if he is but a poor performer across country he is, at any rate, a stout friend to every kind of sport.

But Vega! young, and active, and framed to excel, what excuse can be made for her?

Miss Mossop stands before the fire one afternoon, with her arms akimbo, and one gaitered foot held to the cheerful blaze, as she talks to her young sister-in-law. This is a non-hunting day, and a tramp of five miles to Gornaway Castle, and the same distance back, has given her both exercise and an object for a walk. She seems to be dressed almost entirely in leather, for her strong, manly-looking legs are encased in the most workmanlike tan gaiters, which reach nearly to the knee, where they are met by a short and scanty petticoat, which

has more of the same serviceable material than anything else in its composition. A Norfolk jacket is strapped and bound in the same way, and her big, somewhat bullet-shaped head, round which sandy hair is plaited in the firmest and most unaffectedly ugly manner, is crowned with a low deer-stalking cap, also bound with leather. Gloves, half worsted, half dogskin, hide her strong, useful, capable hands, and a stout black thorn stick lies on the chair beside her.

She is a model of all that is uncompromising, and sporting, and practical, as far as dress goes.

Her friend Lady Gornaway, who accompanied her part of her journey home, was dressed on much the same lines, the only difference being that her small, refined little face, well set on head, slim, slight figure, and, above all, the look of "race" that, do what she liked, she could not get rid of, prevented her having the same stalwart, manly look of her companion.

Lady Gornaway was one of those for-

fortunate people who would look like a princess if she were dressed in rags, and no amount of modern abominations in the shape of tan leggings, Norfolk coats, or leather-bound caps could entirely spoil her charming appearance ! Not so “ Charley Mossop ! ” She means to look as like a man as possible, and she succeeds wonderfully well in her object ; but as sex, after all, cannot be entirely set aside, it must be owned that she looks rather a cut short and awkward imitation of one than the genuine article.

She and Lady Gornaway have ever been fast friends, and Mr. Mossop, who has always been fond of his sister, and proud of her performances in the hunting field, likes her none the worse on that account. He even admires her loud voice, her manly stride, her “ hail-fellow, well-met ” manner with most of those who pursue the fox in the wake of Lord Gornaway’s hounds, for has not Lady Gornaway all these peculiarities also ?—only with a difference which he does not quite take in.

In fact, so long as the greatest lady in the county and his sister are hand and glove the

latter may do pretty much as she likes, the consequence being that "Charley Mossop" is quite a character in Blankshire, and the Mossop family are pleased and proud that it should be so.

No one ever addresses her in a more formal manner; there was a time when her brother had tried to make a stand on that point, and at one of his biggest dinner parties had pointedly spoken of her as Charlotte, but the notion had been received with so much mirth, and she was so little the accepted type of a "Charlotte," that he speedily relapsed into the boy's name that suited her so much better than the dowdy German-sounding one bestowed on her by her godfathers and godmothers.

She continues her conversation with her sister-in-law, who certainly looks an example of the truth of Miss Mossop's words.

She has been little out of doors to-day—it has been too cold and raw for driving, and after she had wandered once round the ornamental pond, dignified by the name of the lake, there was nowhere else to go to. Muddy

roads do not tempt her, and though Miss Mossop had proposed that she should walk over to Gornaway Castle with her, the distance was really more than she could well accomplish.

She is angry with herself for feeling bored and dull. It must be her own fault, but it is a fault she does not know how to cure.*

The loneliness of her young days has not in any way prepared her for the particular form of existence that is now her lot.

Then there was at least something to wonder at, to fret over, to fill her thoughts ; now it seems as if life is but an unending march of meaningless hours, which form themselves into weary, profitless days.

She has no troubles, no cares, no responsibility, and no work ; but at the same time she has no pleasure in life, no joy, no excitement. She feels like a perpetual visitor in her own home, and she knows she is but a mere cipher in it.

She has too much mind to become a mere machine, to be satisfied only with eating and sleeping, and wearing soft raiment ; and yet

how can she change anything in a life which was in full blast before she had either part or lot in it, and which would go on as perfectly without her as with her ?

Miss Mossop, too, has a glimmering that something should be altered in the young girl's life; but how it is to be done she cannot tell.

They could never really be companions ; Vega is so many years younger than herself, and their ways are as far apart as the Poles ; but she pities her pretty forlorn sister-in-law ; she cannot exactly say why, and as her panacea for all the woes of life has, up to the present time, been active exercise in the open air, she can think of nothing else more likely to do her good.

“ You haven't enough go, enough energy, my dear Vega,” she says to Mrs. Mossop, who certainly appears rather fragile and delicate, and who, nestling among the great silken cushions of the inglenook in the hall, looks a strong contrast to the leather-clad Charley. “ Can't you do something—interest yourself somehow ? I must say if I

didn't go in for hunting, I should find The Towers cruelly dull. It's all so cut and dried here ; that's always the way with these new places ; but surely you could find something to amuse you all the same. If you won't ride, can't you go in for pigs, or poultry, or the garden, or something or other ? ”

Vega laughs—she likes Miss Mossop—she is grateful for her concern about her ; but, the pigs ! the poultry ! the garden !! why ! they are all the very models of perfection. People come from Grimthorpe on certain days on purpose to see them, and to admire the wonderful manner in which the prize breeds in every department are managed, and looked after, and kept.

She might certainly wander through the home farm and the poultry yards, and the conservatories oftener than she does, but it would only be as a sightseer, for no good to anything concerned would come of it.

There is nothing to be done, nothing to be suggested, nothing that the most fastidious person could alter. Everything at The Towers is perfection, and there is no scope

there for change, or improvement of any kind.

She says as much to Miss Mossop.

“Poor little thing!” returns Miss Charley, after a pause, during which she first holds one gaitered foot to the cheerful blaze, and then the other. “Well, I suppose we may as well look matters steadily in the face; the long and short of it is, I see very well what’s wrong—we are *too old* for you.”

“No, no!” says Vega, feebly.

“Yes,” says Charley, stoutly; “but it is a fact all the same. I have no wish to make myself out older than I am, not that I really care twopence about my age, but there is no denying that I have, I suppose, fifteen years or so the advantage of you, and as for Albert, well! the less said about that the better. The fact is, we—he and I—have reached a reasonable kind of age. We have all our occupations cut and dried and ready to our hand. We would be fools if we couldn’t fill in our days and know what we wanted by this time; but you are a child, and don’t know what to be at. I hope you like

us a little ; but one can't blink the fact that we are no companions to you. Can't that be changed, at any rate ? Have you no friends of your own that you could ask to The Towers to keep you company ? What about all the Conholt Park people ? ”

No one at Conholt seems to have given Vega a thought since they got rid of her in such a satisfactory manner.

Lady Julia has verified her own words when she announced that she should see uncommonly little of her once she got her out of the house. There is little chance indeed of her taking much interest in the girl she had always so heartily disliked, and who she cannot now meet without being reminded of one or two incidents in connection with her which does not reflect credit on herself, and which her conscience has never thoroughly condoned.

She drives herself over at rare intervals to The Towers, asks Mr. and Mrs. Mossop to some of her big dinners or entertainments, treats Vega as if she had nothing on earth to do with her, and at the same time loudly

asserts that Mrs. Mossop owes her a debt of gratitude in finding a rich husband for her, and putting it in her power to make a good marriage.

Colonel Damer's feelings to Vega are very different from those of his wife ; but he is a very busy man, and though friendly enough with Mr. Mossop, they have nothing in common, while the ostentation and swagger of the purse-proud owner of The Towers have always been particularly offensive to him.

He is thankful when his wife assures him that Vega is happy in her new home. The memory of her dead mother, and of the letter written by a man who, though he had never been his friend, had solemnly commended his child to his care, were hardly needed to make Colonel Damer Vega's fast friend. He had liked her for herself from the first day that she had sailed with them in the *Gitana* ; when she had had such a bad time in his own house he had befriended her as much as he dared without running the risk of making matters worse, and when it was decreed by some one stronger and a great deal more

determined than himself, that the rich, elderly, underbred owner of The Towers should marry the lovely child, he did his best to oppose the ill-assorted marriage. Now he can only take it for granted that things are going well with her. It seems to him something like sacrilege that she should ever have been handed over to a Mr. Mossop; but what is done cannot be undone, so he asks no questions, and the result is, he hardly ever sees her, except in a crowd.

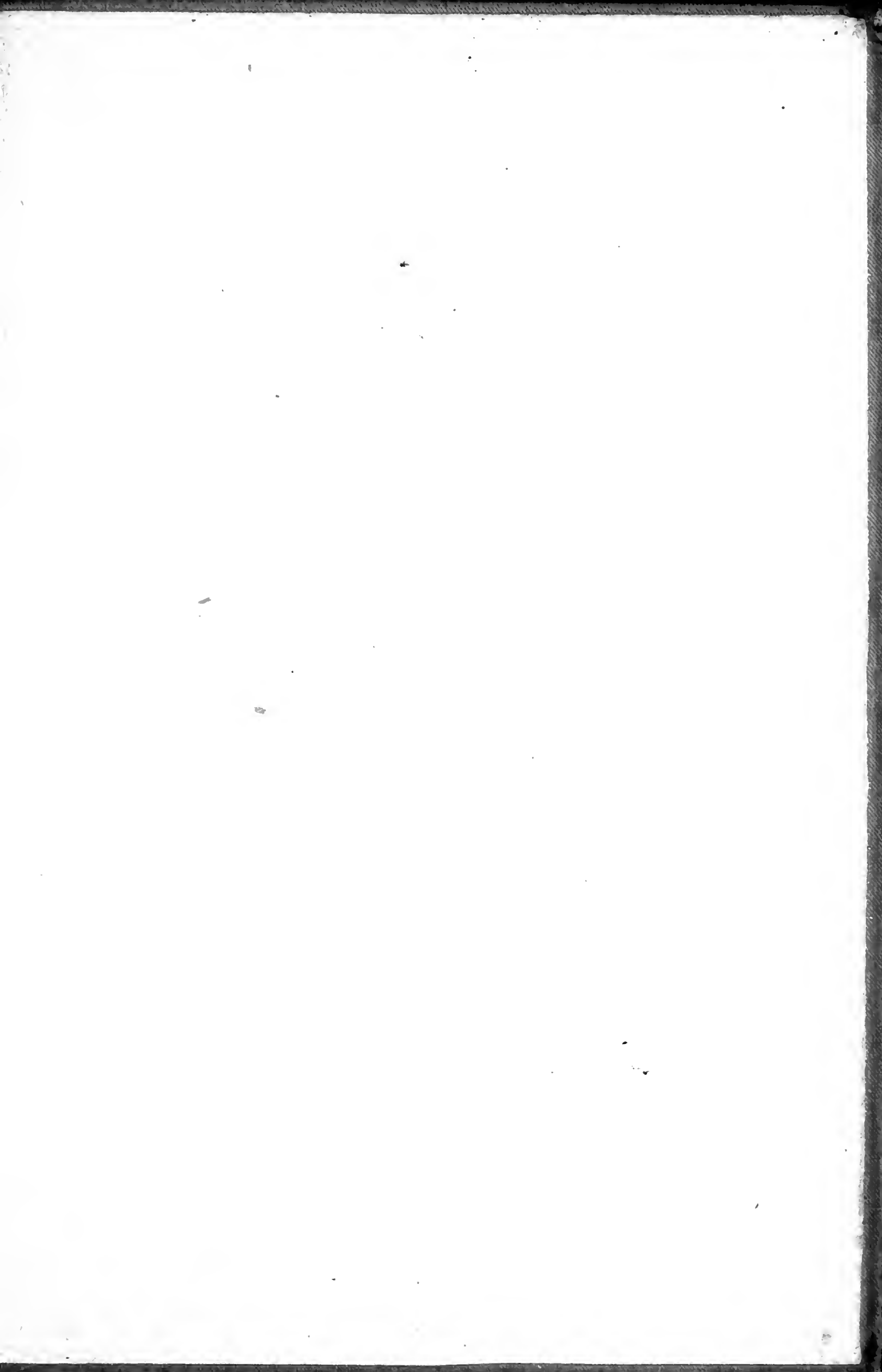
Lady Hermione has always been filled with a feeling of personal animosity to Vega, which has remained stationary, but which certainly has not worn itself out by the action of time.

As for Pussie Langton, she has never been anything but a cipher; but Dottie—is it possible that the day has come for Vega to turn to her for friendship, or at least for companionship?

There is no doubt that when Miss Mossop challenges her to find some one of her own age to be with her now and then she can think of no one else.

No one ever accused Charley Mossop of indolence or procrastination ; her energy is a proverb, and having taken it into her head that Vega is dull and bored, and would be happier with a companion of her own age, it is not long before a letter is in the post-box inviting Miss Dottie Langton to honour The Towers with her company.

END OF VOL. II.



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